

In an unpublished profile, questions about Epstein and about journalism



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THE SCOOP

Buried deep in the House Oversight Committee's recent release of 20,000 emails from Jeffrey Epstein's inbox is an 8,684-word [profile](#) of the disgraced financier. The article has no byline and, in the way of these document dumps, isn't obviously connected to anything else. But the amused, morally ambiguous tone is familiar from some of the great biographies of the age — biographies of Rupert Murdoch and Donald Trump, in particular.

The author is Michael Wolff, he confirmed when I called him about it Sunday.

"Jesus, it's pretty good!" he said, after giving the PDF a read at his home in Amagansett.

Epstein, as Wolff has written before, wanted the incisive and divisive New York media writer to rehabilitate his damaged reputation. By 2014, Wolff was spending hours at Epstein's mansion watching a parade of powerful men troop through, and considering writing. But he asked that Epstein persuade friends, particularly Bill Gates, to talk to him. Wolff says he sent over the draft to give Epstein a sense of what could come out of the reporting process.

“It could be like this — but I need to have access to everybody,” Wolff recalled telling him. “I’m trying to lead him along to give me something, and the something would be: Give me access to everybody.”



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Back to Wolff in a moment, and to questions of journalistic ethics. (The AP’s David Bauder tried interviewing a prominent journalism ethicist about Wolff’s relationship with Epstein and reported that her voice “[rises in anger just contemplating](#)” it.)

The unpublished 2014 article is the record of a rare journalistic encounter with one of the 21st century’s iconic monsters. It’s not a story Wolff has kept hidden. I recall him fretting in 2021 about where he could publish a piece that revealed his own proximity to Epstein, which he ultimately put in a [book](#) of essays. I led a [column](#) in The New York Times with the story that fall. (Wolff worried that his beat had become “elderly sex offenders.”)

In the 2014 profile, Wolff takes a shot at the mystery of why these billionaires had turned to a former math teacher with no obvious credentials to manage their money: “His stock in trade is not precisely the making of money, but the issues that arise when money, at a heretofore unimaginable rate, makes itself, altering many basic economic, social and personal calculations. ... Epstein’s long-time business thesis is that the rich know very little about money,” he writes. (Trump, who may not have this problem, is only mentioned once in the piece, in passing, though Wolff’s current focus is his friendship with Epstein.)

The profile predates Julie K. Brown’s [reporting](#) on the sweetheart deal that largely kept Epstein out of jail. It predates the presidential election of his former friend, Trump; Epstein’s final arrest; his suicide; his injection into the American political unconscious.

And in that context, Wolff, at some length, conveys Epstein's side of the story, and his characterization of underage girls he abused in Florida as prostitutes who lied about their age.

There's also this assessment of the young women Epstein's 2014 life: "Epstein's young women mingle freely with his powerful guests, not so much as hostess or, in tabloid language, harem-like (or as 'sex slaves'), but often as attentive students (that, of course, might be regarded as having its own fetish-like attraction)."

There's a preview of the current fevered sense of the story: "He surely represents the kind of insiderism that is mostly just a figment in outsiders' fantasies. Except for the fact that, straining credulity, Epstein is real. His is an ultimate sort of fantasy of power, wealth, and secrecy."

(Other eye-popping moments pop up throughout the article: At one point, Epstein chides a Qatari royal on "financing the bad guys," and then discusses with him a pistachio and chocolate mix that sounds a lot like the current Dubai chocolate craze. Can we blame Epstein for that too?)

Finally, Wolff writes: "And this story is, in its way, about the limitation of journalism, in which the most compelling parts of the tale — Epstein's ambitions and impulses would be well-suited to a long-running cable drama — need to be sacrificed not just to moral certainty but to a rather preposterous fantasy of moral certainty."



BEN'S VIEW

I'll let you read [Wolff on Epstein](#), in draft form and in his [collection](#), and content myself with writing about Wolff.

And what should producers and consumers of American media, which is already in deep disrepute, think about Wolff, our least reputable face?

By the time a reader pointed out the unpublished Wolff draft to me in the House Oversight emails, I was already working on a column about his

continuing profound relevance in the age of Trump, a writer condemned by many of his peers as sloppy and amoral and yet somehow often in the room.

Wolff had already turned up in chummy Epstein emails. His name appears in the House Oversight documents 213 times, according to a database compiled by the Democratic-aligned news organization Courier. Wolff traded gossip with Epstein and offered PR advice. The Wall Street Journal [described](#) him as Epstein's "unofficial consigliere."

Now he believes that, if anything, too few journalists are playing his game. Why do we know so little about Epstein? Because, according to Wolff, "I'm the only person who was able to get into that house and write an up-close story."

One of the questions about access journalism is: Have you been bought?

Wolff has a pretty good record of burning the people who somehow continue to invite him to things. His 2010 Murdoch [biography](#) infuriated the mogul and prompted a shakeup among the people who had let Wolff in. [Fire and Fury](#) was unsparing with his sometime friend Steve Bannon and others in Trump's orbit. His more recent Trump coverage has included details the White House has denied and nobody else could confirm, and some that have become part of the historical record.

But it's impossible to deny that in his coverage of Murdoch, of Trump's circle, and of Epstein he captured scenes and voices that would otherwise have gone unrevealed. His methods — winning access, betraying confidences, refusing to play by commonly-accepted rules, apparently sharing drafts with subjects — also represent much of what sources and ordinary observers find repellent about journalists.

But Wolff has never shown any compunction about biting the hand that feeds him, another unpleasant journalistic qualification. There's no reason to think, given his record, that he wouldn't have burned Epstein once he'd filled his notebook.

The harder question the draft profile raises is how access shifts your perspective. In the draft, you get an unsettling glimpse of Epstein through Epstein's eyes. It's a profile that, like certain works of fiction — Donna Tartt's *Secret History* did this for me — seems to make the reader complicit, nevermind the writer.

Wolff drops out of character once to wonder if he isn't witnessing "the ultimate feminist nightmare: Men (and a few opportunistic women) continue to come to Epstein's because — no matter their public bows to modern manners — they simply don't care that he offends every aspect of reconstructed gender and political sensibilities. In private, it remains a man's world — a rich man's world."

Wolff concludes the 2014 profile like this: "Anyway, I hope I get invited back to Jeffrey's house soon."

Wolff is not an idiot, and he's been taking this sort of criticism, and having this sort of argument, since before I had a byline. He of course knows he played a morally ambiguous role in exchange for access.

For that, he got a first-person view, and hours of tape, of one of our century's big monsters.

"How do you get inside with these people?" he asked me. "There's not a lot of mystery: You suck up — and then you spit out!"

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NOTABLE

- **Wolff defended himself Sunday in [The Daily Beast](#):** "I am the only one who has been shouting from the rooftops that the central issue here is Donald Trump's relationship to this monster."

- **“The most likely explanation is that Wolff’s desire for Epstein’s insider’s dope on Trump outweighed any concern for his source’s own wrongdoings.** This week the extent of that Faustian bargain in pursuit of a good story was revealed,” Ed Pilkington wrote in the [Guardian](#).
- **Is Wolff, asks [David Graham](#), who Janet Malcolm had in mind in her famous assessment** that “every journalist who is not too stupid or full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible”?