

Obama: Kanye West a 'jackass' for outburst

9/15/2009 5:25:14 PM ET

NBCNews.com

President Barack Obama's candid thoughts about Kanye West are provoking a debate over standards of journalism in the Twitter age.

ABC News says it was wrong for its employees to tweet that Obama had called West a "jackass" for the rapper's treatment of country singer Taylor Swift. The network said some of its employees had overheard a conversation between the president and CNBC's John Harwood and didn't realize it was considered off the record.

The network apologized to the White House and CNBC.

Harwood had sat down with the president to tape an interview following his appearance on Wall Street on Monday. Although they are competitors, CNBC and ABC share a fiber optic line to save money, and this enabled some ABC employees to listen in on the interview as it was being taped for later use.

Their attention was drawn to chatter about West, who was widely criticized for interrupting Swift as she accepted an award at Sunday's MTV Video Music Awards to say that Beyonce deserved it.

E-mails shot around among ABC employees about Obama's comments, said Jeffrey Schneider, ABC News spokesman. Before anything was reported on ABC's air or Web site, at least three network employees took to Twitter to spread the news.

One was Terry Moran, a former White House correspondent. He logged on to Twitter and typed: "Pres. Obama just called Kanye West a 'jackass' for his outburst at VMAs when Taylor Swift won. Now THAT'S presidential."

Tweets deleted but too late

When ABC News authorities found out about it, they had the tweets deleted after about an hour, Schneider said. Moran declined a request to comment.

But the news was out.

Harwood said there was no explicit agreement with the president that those comments were off the record. But he said it is broadcast tradition that such pre-interview chatter is considered off the record until the formal interview begins. Harwood is holding to that: He would not discuss what the president said before their interview and has no plans to do so on CNBC.

He said he was aware that it was likely someone outside of CNBC was listening to his conversation with the president.

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"It's one of those things that's unfortunate," he said. "But I think it's an honest mistake."

There was no immediate response to requests for comment from White House spokesmen.

Twitter, a technology that's a natural tool for reporters who love to tell people what they know whenever they know it, has raced ahead in usage before many news organizations have developed policies to govern its use, said Richard Wald, a former ABC News executive and professor at Columbia University.

"You need to reinforce the sense that you have to verify before you publish," Wald said. "The policies may be very comprehensive, but they may not be adequate to the technology that news organizations have."

The incident is reminiscent of past "open-mic" incidents involving politicians. President Ronald Reagan, while waiting to make a speech in 1984, joked that he had outlawed the Soviet Union and that "the bombing begins in five minutes." During the 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush turned to running mate Dick Cheney to point out a reporter from The New York Times and used an obscenity to describe him.

Can a leader expect privacy?

"If you're sitting there with a microphone on, you don't have a reasonable expectation of privacy," said Kelly McBride, an expert in journalism ethics for the Poynter Institute. "If you're a governor or president, you know that."

She also questioned whether news organizations should be agreeing to go off the record with the president.

Judging by the things written by other Twitter users since West's action, Obama wasn't in the minority, she said.

"The president calling Kanye West a 'jackass' is perfect information for a tweet," she said. "In fact, that's the ideal format. You can do it in 140 characters. There's not much else to say."

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