

Transatlantic tales

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Yes it's that time of year for those "What I Did On My Holidays" essays. Or in my case, "What Media I Consumed" on holiday in California. It raises that age-old comparison of American and British journalism. We speak the same language, but it sure sounds and looks different. Let's take two examples of Stateside journalism at its best and possibly worst.

First, the very thorough and compelling documentary about the Enron scandal, [The Smartest Guys In The Room](#) which I watched on the sumptuous 6 inch screen provided by Virgin Atlantic. It's a well-made, if traditional film. But what struck me was how all the financial journalists went along with the Enron hype until Fortune reporter [Bethany Maclean](#) decided to ask some very obvious questions about what was behind the Enron bubble. She was, of course, ignored by her colleagues and vilified by Enron, but she was right. One can only admire her command of basic journalistic principles. But it also makes you wonder how many other business scandals are being ignored, not because of corruption but because financial journalists are too tied up in mutual back-scratching with companies and, perhaps, because they are too economically illiterate to see a scam for what it is. Whether British financial journalism is any better is something I simply don't know, but whenever I entered the world of reporting on companies I found it to be a place where good journalism has to fight hard not to be eaten up by the City PR machines. And where my 'O' Level Maths was no match for complex company balance sheets.

The other horrendous example is the [JonBenet Ramsey](#) case. She was the six year old beauty queen murdered in 1991. It's difficult to understand from a British perspective why this case has so captured the lurid imagination of the tabloid-consuming American public. But it is covered on a scale we can only compare to the Soham killings or the Moors Murders. The furore was stoked massively this summer when a 41 year-old ex school teacher John Karr 'confessed' to killing her. He's now charged with possessing child pornography but it appears that the links between him and JonBenet's death are based on no factual evidence. That didn't stop the US media's rush to convict him for the crimes he'd owned up to. Just as ten years ago they had rushed to imply that JonBenet's own parents had killed their daughter. One TV talk show host had even gone so far as to hold a mock trial which decided that Mr and Mrs Ramsey were 'liable' for JonBenet's death. In America you are just as innocent until proven guilty as you are in Britain. But in practice America's constitutional bias in favour of freedom of speech means that the media does not have to observe that principle. And the pressures of 24 hour news channels means that mistakes are made and reputations trashed before the facts emerge. A little, perhaps, like the story I missed while on my holidays, the 'abduction' of [Scottish-Pakistani Molly Campbell](#), also known as Misbah Iram Ahmed Rana. BBC News 24 has been honest enough to admit it leaped ahead of reality on that one, but it shows that we are just as susceptible to this kind of thing as our American cousins. The pressure to report first and check later has sparked a [heart-felt debate](#) in the American media. Over here we too should be asking ourselves how to reconcile speed with accuracy in our reporting. I suspect one solution is to ask those simple basic questions that helped Bethany Maclean break the Enron story.

Meanwhile – don't forget [POLIS](#) has now published its events programme for the autumn – we'll be looking at War Reporting and hearing from Aljazeera and the Press Complaints Commission among many other things.

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