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ANNOUNCER: This is CNN & Company, with Mary Tillotson.

TILLOTSON: Thanks for being with us. What price celebrity? Mega-star Michael Jackson this week has been hit by accusations he molested a 13-year-old boy. Los Angeles police confirmed they are investigating Jackson, but they have not charged him with anything, and Jackson's people say the accusation is a lie, part of an extortion plot.

Here to talk about the press, public figures and propriety are Diane Dimond, a reporter for the TV show Hard Copy, attorney Greta Van Susteren, Flo Anthony of The New York Post, and Leslie Bennetts of Vanity Fair. Glad all four of you could be with us today.

We'll start with Diane. If this were Joe Blow and a story about Joe Blow, a lot of us would be much less anxious to run with it in the way we are, wouldn't we?

DIANE DIMOND, 'Hard Copy': Well, I think everybody these days is critically interested in child abuse, I think it's being talked about a lot, more now than it certainly was 15 or 20 years ago when I was growing up. If it was only Joe Blow would we be interested? Yeah, I think that we would be. But he's not Joe Blow, he is the biggest entertainer in the world, and so it does make it more interesting to more people.

TILLOTSON: And more salable.

DIMOND: Uh, certainly. I mean, you're doing a show on it, we're doing a show on it. I don't look at it in terms of profit, though. I look at it in terms of public interest.

TILLOTSON: And to Greta, the reality is if this were Joe Blow, the laws apply differently, don't they? We'd all be much more careful because the laws would require us to be if it were not a public figure at the center of this story.

GRETA VAN SUSTEREN, Trial Attorney: That's absolutely right, Mary. When you're a celebrity, when you're a public figure, if anything is said about you, you must show not only that it was untrue, but also that it was said with malice, that it was said for a bad purpose, a bad reason. If you're an ordinary person, something that's said about you that's untrue does give you something to go to court about. But if you're a public figure, you must prove so much more, and it's extremely difficult to show that it was done for a bad reason.

TILLOTSON: I think reporters have gotten a lot of public criticism, consistently we have, but particularly in the light of events [unintelligible] story, talk about overstepping the bounds of what is good and proper to print. To Greta again, what's the theory underlying the idea that if you're a public figure, a reporter can print something that is not true as long as there was not malicious intent involved, or I think the other phrase is 'a conscious disregard of the truth,' malicious disregard.

VAN SUSTEREN: That's right. That's the tough thing about being a celebrity, is that people can say just about anything about you, including untruths, as long as they don't do it for a bad purpose. But essentially it goes with the territory. When you become a celebrity in many ways you sort of lose some of your rights that maybe the ordinary citizen does, because you become of public interest, everybody wants to know

about you. And the media has a right and perhaps an obligation to the people to talk about those who are in the public eye.

TILLOTSON: To Flo, you know the Jackson family, you think these charges are unfounded. Does that mean none of us should be reporting about them, though?

FLO ANTHONY, 'New York Post' Reporter: No. I believe that it's news and we have to report about it, but first of all, I disagree with you ladies that because of the fact that it's Michael, these allegations of child abuse are being reported so widely. I mean, Michael's sister LaToya and I, two years ago, went to visit a little girl that had been tethered to a wall in her house, that, you know, with allegations of child abuse and all that was widely publicized. So I think that any time there's a case of child abuse it's widely publicized. I don't agree that it's just because it's Michael. I think perhaps because it's Michael it's made worldwide news, but certainly it would make local and national news if it was anyone.

TILLOTSON: Have you had any contact, Flo, with the family since this story broke a few days ago?

ANTHONY: Yesterday I did talk to a representative of the Jackson family, and they're all standing behind Michael, saying that the allegations are false and that it's total extortion, and he's a person that would never hurt a child.

TILLOTSON: To Leslie Bennetts, have you ever covered such similar stories yourself, and as a reporter, how uneasy does it make you to delve into someone's private life in this way?

LESLIE BENNETTS, 'Vanity Fair': Well, I think that entirely depends on the circumstances. I spent many months investigating the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests and the coverups of the Catholic church hierarchy a couple of years ago. In fact, Vanity Fair was the first major national magazine to do a major story on that, and that story has come a long way since then. It didn't make me at all uneasy. It very quickly became apparent to me in doing the reporting that there were generations' worth of abuse by priests of children and teenagers, and that the hierarchy had made every effort to hush these things up, rather than to deal with the grief of the victims. And as we all know now - I hope we all know - that the sexual abuse of children causes lifelong damage. I mean, people 30 years later are still dealing with it. So I think it is of the utmost importance to uncover this and to deal with it and to get help for the victims, and for the press to cover it.

I mean, Michael Jackson, you know, as far as the standards that are applied to celebrities go, I mean, I would invoke Harry Truman. If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. Michael Jackson has earned hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars by being a public figure. Well, the flip side of being a public figure is that you're going to get a certain amount of scrutiny, and I think he's largely evaded that over the years. He's led an extremely reclusive private life with very little scrutiny of what he was doing behind the locked doors of Neverland. And now it's just horrifying to think he might have been using his fame and his power and his wealth to abuse kids. And there is- you know, even though charges have not been filed yet, the investigation is ongoing, and from all, you know, indications, it's broadening. More children are being interviewed. The taxpayers' money is being used by the Los Angeles Police Department to conduct this investigation. I have absolutely no uncomfortableness whatsoever about the fact that the press is looking into this. I think it's an entirely appropriate story. Michael Jackson is a role model for hundreds of millions of people around the world. He's, you know, had a great interest in children and has done a great deal of good for children, but if he is also doing terrible things behind closed doors, I think absolutely the public has a right to know, and a factor in whether or not they're going to buy his records. I don't know whether he's guilty or not, but that's an appropriate subject for exploration if the police are investigating, which they are.

TILLOTSON: And to Diane, part of the reason, I would think, that you've been assigned to chase this for Hard Copy has to do with the reasons other people decided to go into print with it, too. There are, apparently, court documents in which the accusation at least exists. That doesn't mean that it's correct, but it exists.

DIMOND: Right.

TILLOTSON: The police in Los Angeles have said they have gone in and looked into two pieces of property owned by Michael Jackson. What were the decisions involved in your show on going to air with this?

DIMOND: Well, I'll tell you, Mary, I was in a unique situation because Hard Copy is the only- I think I'm the only reporter, I think I can safely say that, to have seen the official documents, the official allegations against Michael Jackson. I got lucky, I'll be honest with you. A source came to me, said, 'I want you to see something.' I met him at a location and looked at it, and it was a stack that thick of documents about the Michael Jackson case. We ran with it on Tuesday because I had it in front of me. I studied these documents for a long, long time, I corroborated as much as I possibly could, and I, too - like Leslie, I've covered a lot of child abuse stories back in New Jersey, the Kelly Michaels case, several of them - and I read the narrative of this child and it was familiar, the same terminology was used. This boy said that when he finally, in June, told the superstar that 'I don't want to see you anymore' - they were in Monaco at the time - Jackson threatened him and said, 'Well, you know, if you tell, you're going to go to juvenile hall.' That's sort of a typical abuser thing to do.

Again, I want to stress, I don't know if the documents I saw, if the narrative of this boy is true. But again, like Leslie says, I think we have a responsibility to report what we- what we know, especially about role models, and especially when it involves children. We told you on Tuesday night on Hard Copy that there were other cases involved, and last night I was able to go with- there are four other what they call corroborating- no, they call them companion cases. The L.A. Times went with it this morning. But we're not talking about one 13-year-old boy, gee, are his parents having a custody fight. We're talking about five separate case files.

TILLOTSON: May I ask this, too? Since Jackson's spokespeople maintain in their defense - in his defense - that this is all part of an extortion plot, did you see anything in the documents that you've read through that would substantiate that counterargument?

DIMOND: Mm-hmm, I did. I did, to be honest with you. But I never saw anything like the \$20-million figure this so-called security expert from the Jacksons is talking about. In the documents that I saw, the boy tells his father, his real father - the family is separated - what happens. The father, according to these documents, goes to the Jackson people, threatens to file a civil suit, and there was, according to the documents, a 'cash settlement discussed.' Nothing was given, I don't know who-

TILLOTSON: And that doesn't mean the father initiated it?

DIMOND: Right. Right. I didn't get any indication that money-

TILLOTSON: Who did, do you know?

DIMOND: -I didn't get any indication that any money changed hands.

TILLOTSON: You're suggesting here that it was someone representing Michael Jackson who initiated, not extortion, but a payoff to keep him quiet.

DIMOND: No, I can't really say that, Mary.

TILLOTSON: All right.

DIMOND: I guess that would be a better story, but no, I- from the documents I read, the police documents, I can't tell you. A cash settlement was discussed. Who brought it up, who initiated it, I just don't know yet.

TILLOTSON: On that point we're going to take a break. We have a lot more to talk about. Stay with us.

1st RESPONDENT: Michael Jackson is more or less a role model. I couldn't actually see him, you know, doing anything like that.

2nd RESPONDENT: I think the media tends to hype things in general, if you want to know the truth, because it makes good news, especially when you have somebody as famous as Michael Jackson.

[Commercial break]

3rd RESPONDENT: I think it's ridiculous. I mean, for a person like Michael Jackson, that does so much for kids, how could somebody, you know, put him through this.

4th RESPONDENT: I don't think a guy like that could do something like that. I believe it's just somebody that's trying to get some money or something, that's what I think.

TILLOTSON: Fans of superstar Michael Jackson who want to believe he did not molest children, which has been charged in public this week.

To Greta, do you think any of the coverage has gone beyond the line you would draw as an attorney who has defended and advised some clients in similar, though not exactly the same, circumstance?

VAN SUSTEREN: I don't think it's gone beyond the line so far. I mean, a reporter's job is to report facts, that's it, not inject any sort of opinion. And when you hear reporters interviewed on television, perhaps even on this show, expressing some sort of opinion as to ultimately whether or not they think he's involved in it or could have done it, that's when you cross the line. A reporter should only, only report the facts, what's in the public domain. It's almost as if the situation we oftentimes see - with even poor Richard Gere, who gets chastised and made fun of in the press because of his religion - that's overstepping the line. Reporters should report the facts and that's it, and has a very important job to do that for the rest of us.

TILLOTSON: May I ask just this one question that has troubled me, and I'd love to put it to a lawyer, which you are. The police in Los Angeles went into the man's condo and onto his Neverland estate. They seized some evidence or something, videotapes, pictures. It is my understanding that if you wanted to seize property, you would need a search warrant, and then in order to get a search warrant you would most likely need to have a judge assume there's probable cause that you would find something. Am I wrong?

VAN SUSTEREN: That's right. And it may come from a grand jury subpoena, for instance. There may be a warrant that's been issued in that way to secure evidence, and sometimes it's done secretly, and in part to protect the person who's the target of it, because lots of times people are innocent. And right now Michael Jackson enjoys the presumption of innocence, and that's the way we should treat it. We should report the facts, but we shouldn't go beyond it and make suggestions that maybe he's guilty because it's maybe someone's personal opinion.

ANTHONY: Mary-

TILLOTSON: Even if he were charged, he still is presumed innocent. Flo, go ahead.

ANTHONY: Well, I wanted to address, first of all, Diane's pointing out in the documents about the juvenile hall thing. Michael Jackson is - even though, Greta, you're saying this is an opinion, but as an attorney I think you have opinions, too, so I don't want to get in a debate with you about that, but I think we all have opinions - but in the case of this whole juvenile hall language that was used in these documents which, at this point, it's almost like they're faxing around, Michael Jackson is someone who's been a superstar since he was six years old. He's never been exposed to where he would even know anything about any juvenile hall. What I want to say about this whole extortion thing is-

VAN SUSTEREN: But that's your guess. That's your supposition.

ANTHONY: No, I know. I do know. I'm someone-

VAN SUSTEREN: Your job is to report the facts.

ANTHONY: And your job- my job is to report the facts, and I think in this case I am reporting the facts. I'm someone who has written about Michael Jackson for the last 10 years and who knows his family, have traveled all over the world with his sister, I know everyone that's around him very well, and so I think that I can report the facts.

VAN SUSTEREN: You may ultimately be right, but you're drawing conclusions based on your familiarity with him-.

ANTHONY: Well, let me- don't cut me off yet. I just wanted to-

BENNETTS: -and that's the problem. Your job should merely be to look into what's going on and to report the facts and not [crosstalk].

ANTHONY: And that's what I'm doing. I'm looking into what's going on and I'm reporting what I believe to be the facts, and that's what all reporters do.

TILLOTSON: Let's let Diane in.

ANTHONY: Okay.

TILLOTSON: I know she was trying to leap into this, too. Go ahead, Diane.

DIMOND: Well, I believe that you should stick to the facts, too, the absolute facts. And I can only draw on the documents that I had. This was a threat that was given. I don't want to dwell on that. But you know, the search warrant thing, I think, is very, very important to remember, as a fact, the LAPD got two search warrants for two Michael Jackson residences, one not even in its jurisdiction. They had to go to a magistrate, and my LAPD sources tell me that in this politically charged and celebrity-driven town, you don't just go in and say, 'Gee, you know, golly, I think maybe there might be something that we'- you have to go in and prove it. [crosstalk]

TILLOTSON: -Diane, long enough to ask, because I think a lot of reporters found it curious that, without a charge, the LAPD would confirm that they were simply investigating this guy. They could, as we all know, have said they didn't want to comment on it. Why did they choose to do it that way?

DIMOND: I think the whole thing comes down to a locksmith. The first thing I ever heard about this story was a locksmith that the police department had hired and taken up to the ranch at Santa Inez to open every single lock that they couldn't get open so they could search for stuff. And I think that is the genesis of this whole story. The locksmith talked.

DIMOND: Leslie, at one point you were trying to get into the conversation. Go ahead.

BENNETTS: Yeah, I had a whole bunch of things I wanted to say. One is that my understanding is that the father was not the only person to- his allegations were not the only source of this investigation. The child confided in his therapist, and the therapist, I believe, is required by law to report these allegations of child abuse. So it's also coming through official channels. I mean, if this- even if the Michael Jackson people are saying, 'Oh, well, this is just an extortion attempt,' this is also going through, you know, a mental health professional who has a legal obligation to report the allegation of child abuse.

I would also like to say, in response to a question you asked several minutes ago about whether the press has overstepped the bounds, one of the New York tabloids, The Daily News, yesterday reported the name of the child, which I think is overstepping the bounds. I think that if a minor is involved here, just as, you know, there's a big debate about whether rape victims should be protected, but at least they're adults. This is a child. I don't think his name should have been published and I think that's beyond the pale.

ANTHONY: I agree with Leslie on that.

GUEST: But-

TILLOTSON: I agree with it, too. I'm sorry, if you don't agree, we're still going to do it. We'll come back in just a minute.

[Commercial break]

TILLOTSON: Welcome back to our last few minutes. We have been talking today about allegations of child molestation swirling around Michael Jackson this week. To Greta, even if he were able to prove a negative, 'No, I've never molested a child,' even if he is never charged, he's been permanently tarred just by the stories, hasn't he?

VAN SUSTEREN: Absolutely. The allegation of child abuse is a very, very powerful and damaging allegation. Hopefully, if he is ultimately charged and clear of this, he will have the same sort of exposure by the media in terms of the media will broadcast wide and far that he was not guilty and have a fair opportunity to respond, and hopefully the American people will accept that. And that's really the hurdle that must be overcome. We need to have a full story, but we also need a fair story.

TILLOTSON: And to Diane, any sense that, true or false, damage has been done?

DIMOND: Oh, absolutely, positively. We're going to report tonight on Hard Copy that Michael Jackson has already canceled two concerts. He wants to come home, our sources tell us. He has been told to stay right where he is and not come back to the United States, because there's a very real possibility he could be arrested if he comes back.

TILLOTSON: Leslie, all of us, I think, agree, given the circumstances, that this is a story that could not be reported, but what is the countervailing public interest, knowing that the guy is probably permanently tainted by the story whether it's accurate or not, the allegations?

BENNETTS: Well, one of the difficulties with any child abuse case or other sexual abuse case is that ultimately nobody who wasn't in the room with the two people involved- you know, nobody else ever is going to really know for sure. But I think that child abuse and child sexual abuse is- has been one of the great unexamined scandals of American life, and figures now indicate that this is such a pervasive problem in this society, I think that the problem has not been too much scrutiny of whether adults sexually abuse children, let alone whether adult role models-

VAN SUSTEREN: But do we solve that problem by overinvestigating? That's the real problem. Do we solve that problem by overinvestigating and slandering? We're better off telling the facts and-

BENNETTS: I'm not advocating slander. I'm advocating reporting facts.

TILLOTSON: I want to get one last comment from Flo, who does know the Jackson family. We have seen, as Diane mentioned, Michael Jackson change his tour plans while he's abroad. Have you any idea of how this is hitting him?

ANTHONY: No, I don't. It would have to be devastating to him. Here's a man who loves kids, has dedicated most of his life to giving to kids and, you know, to being a philanthropist. So it has to be devastating. I mean, that's almost a stupid question. It's got to be devastating.

TILLOTSON: And you entertain no possibility that the allegation is true?

ANTHONY: As an African-American woman who looks at Michael as a role model and someone who's helped a great deal of people, I would like to believe that it is not true, and I would like to see Michael overcome all of this.

TILLOTSON: And that's something which none of us can know yet.

ANTHONY: No one can know.

TILLOTSON: It's too early. We thank all four of our guests for being with us today. Glad you could join us as well. I'm Mary Tillotson, and now Bobbie Battista is here with a look at what's ahead on News Hour. Bobbie?

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