While factually the tide that's been buffeting Ohio State these last several months is clearly receding, you'd never know that from the attitude of ESPN. In a continuation of the unusually intense and negative coverage the network has devoted to all things Ohio State, ESPN's usually thought provoking and award-winning "Outside the Lines" show decided to step outside its own lines to once again hit the Buckeyes across the chops.

In sum and substance, the show essentially suggested that Ohio State and Jim Tressel set themselves up for this scandal by allowing autograph sessions with players after they had already used up their eligibility, a perfectly NCAA-compliant thing to do. But the innuendo was clear. The program itself is dirty and as proof they offered nothing. More interestingly,not a mention of the most salient fact: there is nothing new to report nor has there been since February.

On the surface this makes ESPN look, at best, petty and at worst, biased. Frankly it's both. The Buckeye haters, who ESPN is clearly courting, and many in the media too cowardly to challenge the World Wide Leader, dismiss any such claims as sour grapes.

But the facts are the facts. With a scandal every bit as troubling as the Buckeyes troubles brewing in Oregon Ducks Country, ESPN has done little more than give it cursory attention. It's devoted little air time to the matter and hasn't publicly attacked head coach Chip Kelly (let alone call for his dismissal). The reason is that ESPN has done little if any leg work on reporting the story, certainly nothing even remotely related to the time it's put in to trying to find dirt that doesn't exist in Columbus.

ESPN has devoted hours and made dozens of public records requests of the Buckeyes, seeking every bit of information it can possibly uncover to try and bury the team and the program. Meanwhile, it's made only two very perfunctory requests of Oregon, despite a level of activity that raises very serious issues about the program's integrity in general and Chip Kelly's in particular. But more on that disparity in a moment.

To get to the nub of the issue when it comes to ESPN's most recent hatchet job on the Buckeyes, it is well worth noting that nothing new was actually brought forth in its latest expose. In fact, while ESPN is reluctant to admit it for selfish reasons (would it do any good for ESPN to advertise a show to potential viewers that offers no information?), there's been nothing new on this story since the initial facts were brought forth by the Buckeyes last February.

There were a handful of players that had sold memorabilia for free tattoos and other minor goodies and that former head coach Jim Tressel was warned about it and failed to inform his bosses about it.

The first part of the allegation was always the least troubling because it was basically dumb college kids doing dumb college things for chump change. The second allegation, that Tressel knew about the situation and lied about it, was always far more damning. In the end it cost him his livelihood.

You would think that ESPN might actually devote its one sports investigation show to contrasting how the media machine has an unquenchable appetite and has long since stopped discerning between the good and the bad it's fed. It could have showed, for example, how the NCAA had already determined that there was not a lack of institutional control and that, in actuality, Ohio State's compliance program was actually pretty good. That would have been the responsible thing to do.

But responsibility has long since left town, which is what happens when one media partner comes to dominate the spectrum, not to mention the fact that this would not have played well with the narrative that ESPN and Sports Illustrated have offered up for these last several months. It's almost as if ESPN in particular merely decided to double down, putting the Buckeyes program and its fans back through the wringer, almost for sport.

Most of what both outlets reported were sourced anonymously and never proven. Especially egregious was the Sports Illustrated expose by George Dohrmann that was actually repeatedly discredited by the facts. Sports Illustrated still hasn't apologized and that piece of shoddy reporting still forms the basis for much of what ESPN has been doing since.

This kind of thing is certainly commonplace as the byproduct of a country founded in part on freedom of the press. Responsible news organizations sometimes get things wrong and that is the burden we all have to bear in order to have a more open and free society.

Indeed I have no particular axe to grind with ESPN simply because they may be wrong. However the axe I do have to grind with them is over their incessant need to appear to be not just correct but responsible all the while cloaking a bias for reasons that defy logic. By sheer repetition of the same unproven allegations and the almost total ignorance of the simple fact that this story hasn't changed one iota since last February, ESPN has kept up the illusion that despite having its ratings driven in large part by college football (and hence the carriage fees it can charge for its service that gets passed along to those same fans via their cable or satellite bills), it can fairly cover that industry.

Hardly.

Ohio State may have a hundred pound gorilla of a football program but that hardly serves as an excuse for going after it as if it's a piñata to be poked periodically on the off chance that something will fall out. Even the lawsuit that ESPN filed over but a handful of records that were withheld from the volumes of records requested was done in part to add further cover to the illusion of responsibility ESPN is trying to portray in its antics.

What that lawsuit really does, in context, is shine a light on how irresponsible and unbalanced ESPN really has been toward the Buckeyes.

In an exhibit to that lawsuit, ESPN reveals the dozens of records requests its staff made of the Ohio State media relations department. That same exhibit also details the yeomen efforts that the OSU media relations department made to comply with those requests. The exact dispute of the lawsuit deals not with a general stonewalling of ESPN by Ohio State but with a very narrow group of records that OSU held back as allegedly exempt under privacy laws. OSU claims that

the documents, which are records of certain individuals (none of which are OSU officials), are protected by the same privacy laws that prevents anyone from indiscriminately poking into the goings on of, say, students.

This is not to get into the merits of the lawsuit either way. It will work itself out as these things usually do. It is to get into the extreme and unfair efforts ESPN has made to try to uncover what they surmised was the dirt of the program, their almost complete failure in that regard and their abject unwillingness to apply those same shoddy standards elsewhere.

At the same time Ohio State was supposedly running a rogue program, the University of Oregon, another major college program but far from the media center of this country, was actually engaging in far shadier practices, as Yahoo Sports detailed.

Oregon and its head coach, Chip Kelly, were actually paying a private individual for supposed recruiting services. The amounts were far more than any player at Ohio State received for his memorabilia individually or the players received collectively. The recruiting services, according to Oregon, were to supplement the Oregon's staffs' own apparently inadequate recruiting efforts. As Yahoo Sports detailed, however, the payments were far more akin to a fee and agent, or Cam Newton's dad, would get for bringing certain players to a certain program.

We know all this because Yahoo Sports (the same outfit that first revealed the Ohio State problems and did so without the attendant innuendo or overreaching) actually had the alleged recruiter on the record admitting as much. In fact, the alleged recruiter, Will Lyles, went further and described in rather sordid detail that he didn't perform traditional recruiting services but instead was paid to exercise his influence over certain recruits. In this regard Lyles was a veritable font of information. He said that after Oregon came on to the NCAA's radar, Oregon then asked him to prepare scouting reports on certain players as part of an after-the-fact justification for his services. He further details, for example, how he advised the family of LeMarcus James to transfer to another high school in his last semester in order to avoid a standardized test he couldn't pass so that he could then be recruited by Oregon (an idea Lyles said Oregon congratulated him on). Lyles detailed other shady conduct and had the handwritten thank you note from Kelly to prove the intimate nature of his access to the Oregon program.

These are some deeply troubling allegations, far more troubling then what occurred at Ohio State (save for the allegations related to Tressel's dishonesty), and have the added benefit of the benefactor of the cash on the record admitting what he had done. But it's Oregon and they

are out west and ESPN could hardly be bothered with the story.

How do I know? Well, let's start with the fact that it's barely been mentioned by ESPN in any of its formats or the fact that there has been no "Outside the Lines" documentary created to detail it.

But let me advance that notion a giant step forward. I sent a public records request to the University of Oregon media relations department to specifically get a copy of each and every records request that it has received from ESPN since December, 2010 about the Ducks football program.

Two weeks ago came back the answer: two. The first request was a list of all the revenues and expenditures from the athletic department. The second was for a list of anyone who received complimentary sideline passes since 2007. ESPN refined its first request when Oregon sent them back a financial report, by asking for expenditures the athletic department made for recruiting services. Ultimately though that's the extent of their investigation into Oregon.

Contrast that again with the literally volumes of materials they've requested from Ohio State (as ESPN itself acknowledged in the lawsuit against Ohio State) and ask yourself whether ESPN really is being the fair and balanced outlet they claim to be.

For example, while ESPN was acutely interested in every email, text or phone call Jim Tressel or Gordon Gee or Gene Smith ever sent or had , in the material Oregon sent me ESPN didn't even bother to request any such material from Chip Kelly, who the recruiter admitted he had direct contact with, or the athletic director.

There were no requests of Oregon into any internal investigatory materials, including their procedures manual, nor any requests of what Oregon may have sent to the NCAA. These same requests were made of Ohio State and for which Ohio State complied.

The difference between these two scandals has everything to do with geography and perception. Unquestionably the Buckeyes are the far more successful football program but it's

not as if the Oregon Ducks are some minor school. They played in the BCS National Championship game last season and in the Rose Bowl the season before that (and lost both). Before that the Ducks were mostly playing in minor bowl games but recent history shows that it's a program on the rise and that Kelly is the reason.

ESPN can offer up any excuse it wants for the disparity of intensity with which its pursued these two stories, but the only explanation that makes any sense (outside of abject laziness) is bias. ESPN started with a theory about the Buckeyes and is hellbent on either proving it right or at least making sure others share that same unproven theory.

Ohio State, or rather certain individuals within Ohio State, did some wrong things here for which they're being punished. That's not the problem. Rather the problem is an irresponsible media, particularly ESPN, continuously hammering the program beyond all bounds of fairness while not applying those same standards to another Division I program with its own serious problems. That amounts to bias, a charge which ESPN would never own up to.

Having been affiliated with the "media" for years now there's one thing I know and will readily admit before nearly any other media member: as professionals they are incredibly thin skinned. They rarely if ever accept any responsibility for the results of their irresponsible actions, wrapping themselves instead in the First Amendment and then claiming that the public are too big of idiots to understand exactly how journalism works.

What both ESPN and Sports Illustrated have done in the case of Ohio State is borderline journalism at best. It only qualifies tangentially as journalism because they were able to get some facts right—the facts that Yahoo Sports uncovered originally. The other stuff is the kind of currency that tabloids like the National Enquirer traffic in more frequently—breathless accusations anonymously sourced. Occasionally they get something right but mostly they are wrong and unapologetic for it. That's not journalism any more than Page Six of the New York Post is journalism.

I said from the beginning that the Ohio State story had no victims but I was wrong. The victims are the profession of journalism and all those who use media as a proxy to uncover the real scandal. I never understood why journalists are so lightly regarded because so many of them do good work. But just like a rogue coach can sully that profession so too can the irresponsible many that dot the payrolls of places like ESPN and Sports Illustrated sully the good working journalists just trying to do a decent, responsible job.

The tattoo scandal and all it actually wrought is certainly not Ohio State's proudest moment. The real irony though is that while Ohio State is already on the road to recovery from it the profession of journalism is all the worse for it.