

General ethical information

If our goal as copy editors is to take responsibility for our papers, to make sure we report the truth impartially, then we must consider some important details:

- What are our obligations/responsibilities?
- What is the public perception? Does it matter?
- What role do codes of ethics play in the equation? Why are they developed?

Ideally, the press is supposed to be:

- free (First Amendment)
- independent
- truthful & accurate
- impartial
- fair

But, is it all that, all the time? Consider coverage of events on Fox vs. coverage on al Jazeera, the New York Times vs. the Washington Post, the New York Post vs. the New York Daily News. How about the New York Times vs. the New York Daily News, or the Washington Post vs. the New York Post? Our role as copy editors is to protect the values of journalism.

see http://www.poynter.org/content/content_print.asp?id=4346&custom=
and http://www.poynter.org/content/content_print.asp?id=4349&custom=

Difference between news and journalism

Some argue that journalism is a practice and that news is information gathered from a press release or gossip as easily as from a source. If we agree with that, then we as editors need to propose that our newspapers contain stories that put the news in context, that offer an analysis and perspective, and that give diverse voices a chance to be heard.

Values of journalism

As editors, what should we keep in mind? Perhaps:

- When making a decision we should listen to our “gut” instinct, but know that such decisions may not always offer a solid defensible reason.
- Likewise, a decision based on rules alone may be difficult to apply since there are conflicts and exceptions within rules.
- Decisions based on rational thought tend to look at each problem (e.g. conflict of interest, reporters accepting gifts, etc.) individually.
- Is the perspective of others necessary, especially those who would argue from the opposite point of view?
- What factors into the decision? Is it important to beat the competition? To make a reputation for getting the story first? Is that consideration alone a right answer?
- Keep in mind that self-serving concerns (e.g., beating the competition) aren’t more important than the interests of the public we serve, or to those who may be hurt by the choices we make.

- A decision made in one particular instance can serve as a case study, but it doesn't dictate how to act in similar cases. Each instance is unique.
- See http://www.poynter.org/ethics/more_info.asp

Trust (values and lying)

The real problem in journalism today is that only about one-third of the public believes what it reads in newspapers and sees on TV. Yet reporters must sell themselves on their credibility. If one member of the press is questioned, then we all are essentially questioned. The public is cynical due to scandals such as Janet Cooke, Jayson Blair, Stephen Glass, Rick Bragg, etc. See http://www.spj.org/quill_issue.asp?REF=488

Mistrust has seeped into the newsroom in the basic trusting relationship between editors and reporters. It also transcends to the bond with readers. After the Blair case, the St. Paul Pioneer Press began sending form letters to people in stories asking them if the story was accurate. Some papers now do not run syndicated stories that quote anonymous sources.

A professional's opinion

Former LA Times Editor John Carroll told a gathering of editors at the ACES national convention in Houston two years ago that incidents such as the Blair scandal are betrayals to the readers (<http://www.copydesk.org/2004conference/ethics.htm>). But he also found a silver lining, pointing out that despite the glaring failure of editors the newsroom found strength in its recovery and a re-dedication to not let it happen again.

“There will be ethical breaches, but we also have staffs who see those ethical breaches like a dagger to the heart,” he said. “That tells you how strong those newspapers are. That feeling doesn't always exist at some news organizations.”

Among the other topics he covered:

- **Anonymous sources:** In Washington, D.C., and Hollywood, anonymous sources are the coin of the realm, and each news organization has to decide how to handle the situation.
- **Balance coverage with community standards:** Newspapers run controversial stories and pictures all the time. The trick is to remember that complaints are a sign of vitality.
- **Credibility:** The key is to maintain integrity. What about the political reporter whose spouse or partner puts political signs on their front lawn? Well, it's a no-no.
- **Role of the copy editor:** The copy editor should be an advocate for the reader, to insist that the reporter tell the story simply and cleanly. And sometimes that may mean being assertive – but diplomatic. That means the copy editor who is used to putting time in front of a computer screen, rather than caring about the overall

package in the paper – who cares more about the speed of copy flow than the readers – has to rethink the job.

(Lack of) diversity and credibility in using anonymous sources

A paper presented before the Newspaper Division at the 2005 conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication said that occasional granting of anonymity remains an acceptable practice in investigative reporting.

The problem a copy editor needs to determine is this: Are the anonymous sources sufficient? Do they provide valuable info, or does using them contradict our responsibility to provide accurate news? In government stories does it let elite sources use the media? And if a newspaper should reflect its community, shouldn't the sources be more than government officials?

Journalism schools stress that students should not rely on anonymous sources but should seek out documents and/or persuade unnamed sources to go on the record. Editors must constantly think of the impact anonymous sources have on readers' perceptions. And as to diversity, editors should be wary of reporters who become comfortable on their beats and continue to quote the same sources.

A 1973 study by Leon Sigal said 78 percent of the 3,000 domestic and foreign news stories in The New York Times and Washington Post in a 20-year period relied on anonymous sources. So editors have to make sure reporters go beyond routine channels (i.e. press conferences, news releases and background meetings).

A 1987 study that re-examined Sigal found that the majority of front-page stories are based on official sources, mostly from male government bureaucrats. In that study the academics studied the Times and Post as well as four North Carolina papers.

And a 1998 study, which did a content analysis of the Tallahassee Democrat and Gainesville Sun, said there was still a preponderance of elite sources in news stories. Therefore it can be argued that editors still have to point out to their staffs that such a practice constitutes a bias for the status quo. This speaks to the process of "reification" (perceiving as fact what is more or less created by people – i.e. an official in a small community who laments about urban sprawl – even if it doesn't exist – long enough until others start to quote that official and urge action to combat sprawl).

It should be noted that a 1993 study said certain industries (the military, government and Hollywood, as Carroll argued) are so specific that official sources are quoted a lot. But editors can still urge reporters to seek out new sources to gain a bigger picture. What an editor has to do is make sure that the alternate source is a viable source. But the opposite view is that a variety of sources can be perceived as the old story structure of "two sides to every argument," and that is not always viable when context or analysis may be needed.

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