

grassroots editor



*A journal
for newspeople*

**Published by the
International Society
of Weekly Newspaper Editors**

Community Journalism Ethics:

*12 of the most common
dilemmas faced by the
small-town press*

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Welcome to this double issue of *Grassroots Editor* focusing on ethical issues that community journalists face on a regular basis. Whether it's publishing stories or photos of human tragedy, becoming involved with community activities, or catering to advertisers, the correct response may differ from newspaper to newspaper. The ethical dilemmas profiled in this issue are intended to give some guidance to those editors who may face similar predicaments. Too often, journalism textbooks and case studies focus only on the metropolitan press while failing to recognize that weekly newspapers may have a completely different outlook.

While the Code of Ethics for the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) says journalists should refuse gifts, this may not be applicable in a small town when the mayor's wife brings a loaf of freshly baked bread to the newspaper office. The SPJ code also says journalists should shun public office and service in community organizations. As the story on page 10 points out, there is often a shortage of willing and capable people to serve on boards in some communities. Most community journalists believe the decision should be made on a case-by-case basis rather than merely following a policy prohibiting it.

These stories were written by students in my Spring 2002 Community Journalism class at Missouri Southern State College. Most of the editors and publishers interviewed are members of the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors (ISWNE). Interviews were conducted by email.

— Chad Stebbins, Editor

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Most editors reject photos of death scenes

By Allison Rosewicz
Junior Communications Major
Missouri Southern State College

Publishing photographs of accident death scenes is one of the most ethically challenging dilemmas an editor faces.

Does an editor run a possible award-winning photo or consider the victim and his or her family? Most community journalists choose the latter.

David Cox, managing editor of *Areawide Media* in Salem, Ark., will not run any picture of a body at an accident scene, nor will he publish a photo of grieving family members.

"We consider this an invasion of privacy," he said. "The family's right to be left alone supercedes our right to publish what we please. And the public's right to know does not require that they see gruesome pictures."

Some people might argue that the size of a community affects whether an accident photo is printed. The smaller the community, the less likely the photo will be published. Judy Johnson, editor of the *Times of Acadiana* in Lafayette, La., disagrees.

"The size of the community has nothing to do with such a decision, or shouldn't," she said. "Whether it's Paris, Texas, or Paris, France, some friend or relative is going to be reading your paper. You have a responsibility to the victim, the victim's family, and ultimately, to your readers, to treat people with respect."

Martha Perkins, editor of the *Haliburton County Echo* in Haliburton, Ontario, on the other hand, believes the smaller the community the more difficult it is to publish an accident photo.

"We certainly are more careful when we know the people involved, which isn't necessarily a noble attribute," she said. "If the family was upset with us, there would be ripples throughout the community. It's not worth it just to have a graphic photo."

While the majority of community journalists refuses to run a picture of a dead body, Jon Brake, editor and publisher of the *Manhattan Free Press* in Manhattan, Kan., would be willing to push the envelope a little bit.

"A body in the background would be big," he said. "Nothing more. The accident photo with a story about the death would work."

Most editors look for alternatives like this to running death scene photos.

When a massive train derailment occurred in the area of Johnson's paper, she sent her top reporter and photo editor to cover the accident. The railcars were carrying highly toxic materials. Some of the cars cracked open, releasing the toxic fumes.

"We pulled that week's cover story and substituted our coverage of the derailment," Johnson said. "But our story focused on the aftermath more than on the grisly details. TV, radio and the area dailies covered those details for several days."

Johnson's *Times of Acadiana* publishes on Wednesday, and the wreck happened on a Sunday, so she had the option of altering her coverage.

William E. Lynch, editor and CEO of the *Sonoma Index-Tribune* in Sonoma, Calif., said it is a "case-by-case call."

"We do not run photos of dead people," he said. "We choose photos of the scene, of the smashed vehicles, and of the firefighters trying to rescue trapped live victims. We do not run bloody, gory photos. The dilemma sometimes comes when we have a very dramatic rescue taking place, we get a great photo, the victim survives, but the photo itself shows quite a bit of blood and suffering."

A couple of years ago, Perkins was reporting on an accident for The *Haliburton County Echo* where firefighters were trying to cut bodies out of a car. She avoided using photos that showed bodies, whether dead or alive.

"In some rescue [pictures] it's been evident that there's a person being rescued, but we never show the face," Perkins said. "Why? If the person lives, the accident is traumatic enough without being forced to look at a less than appealing picture of yourself in the paper. If the person dies, then there's the family to be concerned about."

Johnson said it is up to the victim whether the picture is printed.

"If victims are conscious and talking

and can be interviewed at the scene, then we can take their photo because, obviously, they can tell us not to if they prefer that," she said. "And I believe in respecting those wishes."

Although Johnson and Perkins agree about victims' rights, their beliefs about the purpose of running accident photos do not coincide.

"The primary purpose of accident photos should be to show us what can be done to prevent this from happening," Johnson said. "At daily papers I always required reporters to ask if those involved were wearing seatbelts. They're proven life-savers, and that small editorial comment might remind a few folks to buckle up."

"Accident photos should also convey a sense of the loss and carnage involved in accidents. We all need to be reminded that getting to that meeting on time is far less important than getting there period."

Perkins disagrees. She believes accident photos do not necessarily teach a lesson, and therefore readers should not be forced to look at them. She once had a picture of a snowmobiler who was pulled out of a lake, frozen to death. But Perkins refused to run the photo.

"It was a gruesome, graphic photo," she said. "I lobbied against using it and won because whether you think someone is an idiot for drinking and riding on thin ice at night, that person has a family who deserves respect. I don't buy the argument that showing accident pictures reminds people to be more careful. Everyone already knows that, and a picture would, in the very least, be only a short-term reminder. Everyone also makes mistakes — reaching down to pick up something that's fallen, turning to talk to someone in the back seat. We can't be so judgmental."

Perkins is reluctant to run accident photos at all, but sometimes editors have no other choice. And they often face the consequences.

"We live with and know the people we write about," Lynch said. "We must answer directly to our readers for what appears in our paper. I personally must answer every time I go to the grocery store, to the coffee shop or out to dinner or social events. People will tell me when they don't like what we run in the paper. And yes, I do get

complaints from people who are offended by photos in our paper.”

But friends, family members and other readers are not the only ones who complain. Editors often run into problems with the law.

“Sometimes law enforcement officers try to tell us what we can photograph and what we can’t,” Cox said. “Although we generally don’t make an issue at the scene, we do remind them later that this is outside their jurisdiction.”

Johnson and Brake have had trouble with lawyers. Johnson said the most common problem is attorneys who demand to see every photo taken at the accident scene.

“In the bad old days before digital photography, we told them to get a subpoena and be prepared to pay for all reproductive costs, which we would take care of, without ever relinquishing the negatives,” she said. “In the age of digital photography, when most photojournalists routinely discard all but a few of the images they’ve shot, it’s much easier. We still require a subpoena, and usually prepare two sets, knowing the other side will demand its own copies.”

Brake had a difficult situation where the law would not even allow his reporter on an accident scene. Brake had to fight to get the information.

“When I was editor of the *Derby Daily Reporter* in Derby, Kan., we had an elevator explode,” he said. “The sheriff’s department would not let our reporter past. They did that with all reporters. That was a

result of the district attorney having a fight with the *Wichita Eagle* and sent out a ban on letting reporters have information.

“When I started as editor, the Derby police department would not give out information. I had the reporter start asking for the daily log, and they would not give it to her. We called the Kansas Attorney General’s office, and they gave in.”

Editors can also face the wrath of photographers and reporters when they do not publish accident photos.

“Unless I can convince the photographer to go along with my philosophy of respecting people, including victims, in life and death, then it’s a fight with every single photo,” Johnson said.

She often critiques the pictures she will not run and encourages her photographers to submit the best ones to wire services.

“In my past editor jobs, I found that reporters would get angry at about anything that they did and you did not run,” Brake said. “Some would get angry if their story or photo didn’t make it to the front page and above the fold.”

Editors also face other problems, such as publishing “grip and grin” photos, posed pictures and photos that promote a group or activity.

“They aren’t news; they’re free publicity,” Cox said. “Substantial gifts are news because they impact many people. Most of these staged events have little interest to very many readers.”

Jim Painter, editor of the *West Valley View* in Litchfield Park, Ariz., makes a point to avoid such photos.

“Set-up photos are almost always boring, and as a former news photographer, I believe that if a photo has to be posed, it’s probably not depicting a news event in the strictest sense of the word. News photos should capture a real moment in time, not an artificial moment. Of course, the reality is that many ‘news’ photos are posed.”

Johnson, however, thinks these types of pictures have their place in community journalism.

“I think every newspaper deserts its readers when it refuses to find a place for this kind of news,” she said. “I call it scrapbook journalism, and it can be the lifeblood of a relationship between a newspaper and its community.”

But most editors would agree that the decision to run a photo of an accident scene is the most difficult one.

“Accidents and tragedies are news in a small town,” Lynch said. “They touch us directly. When I was taking photos for the paper (the *Sonoma Index-Tribune*), it was really hard to show up at an accident scene to do my job and find that that victims were friends and people I knew. Still harder is running the photo, knowing that it probably adds to the pain of the victim. The decision is made doubly hard when you know them. It is probably the worst part of the job.

“Being the editor of a small-town newspaper is probably the best job in the world, but it has its challenges. Reporting on the pain, suffering and loss of friends and neighbors is the most difficult. Journalism in a small town is inevitably personal.”

Grip-and-grin photos: A necessary evil?

By Virginia Fairchild
Sophomore Communications Major
Missouri Southern State College

A cheesy smile and a firm handshake are some of the components of a grip-and-grin photo. These are posed pictures that can be found sprinkled throughout some community newspapers. Others, who refuse to print this kind of art, declare that it is unethical and not newsworthy.

Ellen Miller-Goins, news editor of the *Sangre De Christo Chronicle* in Angel Fire, N.M., a family owned weekly publication, said, "They aren't honest. They are a staged event for the purposed of generating media attention.

"In general, we avoid them like the plague, though we occasionally run one."

She said they are an obvious manipulation of a newspaper and the public.

"The groundbreaking of the Angel Fire Library — an all-volunteer effort — is OK," Miller-Goins said. "Angel Fire Resort handing a giant check to Special Olympics is manipulative."

Marcia Wood co-publishes the *Sangre De Christo Chronicle* with her husband, Guy Wood, and said her paper tries not to run the classic grip-and-grin photos, with the exception of ribbon cuttings.

"I'm not sure I consider them unethical. But, we are always tight in our newspaper because we try to cover four small communities," she said, "and we like to have lots of locally generated hard news and features."

Karl Kling, editor of the *Milford* (Mich.) *Times*, a weekly that is part of the

HomeTown Communications Network, said his paper has a policy, since it reflects the local community, to include such photos when they are submitted.

"We frown upon staff members taking such images," Kling said. "A little thought beforehand can prevent such meaningless photos."

Wood said when a donation has been made and someone wants a grip-and-grin photo taken, she asks them to wait until the money is spent and then the paper will take a photo.

Bill Haupt, past president of the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors and an editorial writer and columnist for the weekly *Lodi* (Wis.) *Enterprise*, said his paper is not "big" on grip-and-grins.

"They're generally boring, but sometimes inescapable," he said. "Given this dynamic, we generally attempt to arrange something to create a more interesting photo."

Haupt said the *Lodi Enterprise* generally publishes these photos when a significant amount of money is donated to a local cause or when a local person receives a significant award. He said the newspaper deals with these types of photos on a "case-by-case deal" because it is difficult to draw guidelines.

"If I thought the photos were unethical, we wouldn't run them," Haupt said. "We publish them to recognize people who are trying to make a positive difference in our community. I believe our readers appreciate that sort of recognition."

Craig Harrington, publisher of *The*

Intermountain News in Burney, Calif., a weekly and family owned publication, said his paper publishes grip-and-grin photos when they are requested.

"The photographs get people's faces in the newspaper," he said, "something we found our readers enjoy."

Kling believes these types of pictures are not unethical.

"I just think they are extremely boring, offer little to the newspaper, and are just of no interest to anyone other than those associated with the picture," he said.

Rudy Taylor, publisher of seven weekly newspapers in southeast Kansas, said his newspaper runs grip-and-grin photos.

"We're not particularly crazy about them, but reality hits hard out in these communities and expectations from school, community, and organization leaders usually lead us to grip-and-grins, whether we like 'em or not," he said.

Taylor said his newspaper tries to incorporate action and people doing things in all the photos they publish. He does not believe grip-and-grin photos are unethical.

"Oh, good grief no. Unethical?" he said. "That smacks of control, rules, and journalism professors who wouldn't know how to run a weekly newspaper if they were paid a fortune to do so.

"The true spirit of newspapering eliminates any notion that we must look over our shoulders when taking pictures, or covering stories, or writing editorials, for fear of being deemed unethical. We simply dip our quills in our veins and write!"

Community involvement: How much is acceptable?

By Season Cooley

2002 Communications Graduate
Missouri Southern State College

Weekly newspapers are becoming increasingly popular. Big newspapers just seem to get bigger, leaving more and more of the local, hometown news out. Although all newspapers' basic functions are essentially the same, weekly newspapers, with smaller staffs and less resources than dailies, face different ethical issues. Weekly newspaper editors and publishers, all members of the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors, were asked the same question and asked to reply by e-mail. The question was: Do you believe it is possible to get too involved with your community, which might result in increased demands from these organizations for coverage in your paper? Here are their answers.

Judy Johnson is the editor of *The Times of Acadiana*, a weekly alternative newspaper that distributes 33,500 free copies each Wednesday to eight parishes in Louisiana. The newspaper is published in Lafayette.

"Can a journalist get too involved in his or her community? I don't think so," Johnson said. "I'm a big believer in knowing your community well. I don't think you can cover any community that you don't know. And the best way to learn your community is to get involved with it.

"Of course, there are some limits. You should never feel you have to give up your rights and duties as a citizen just to be a journalist. You should vote. You can belong to a political party. But, you can't hold an office or be a speaker at any political party gathering."

Johnson has always been involved in her communities. If a story comes up that involves a group of which she is a member, Johnson believes it is important that she not cover it unless she and her comrades decide it would bring special insight to the story. In that case, her involvement would be mentioned in an editor's note.

"It depends on the journalist," she said. "All this balancing is very difficult. You have to repeat your limitations to people often. And you have to stick by them. Some journalists won't be able to handle this, and will find it much easier to claim

that belonging to community groups affects their supposed objectivity. For those, staying in their ivory towers is the safe thing to do. But for most of us, we need to be in the world and of it to cover it and cover it well."

Sheila Ambrose and her husband, Dave, publish and edit *The Gillespie Area News* in Gillespie, Ill. She says weekly folks don't put themselves through punishment because they have to.

"They can make far better wages with far less work doing almost anything else. Picking up garbage, perhaps, or cleaning latrines. We do this stuff because we want to, because we love it like no other job," Ambrose said.

"I think local publishers can become too involved with their communities, and such involvement can taint the objectivity of their news coverage. Still, the business climate demands that publishers be visible in their communities."

The Ambroses live in a different town from where the paper is published. Sheila believes they can be objective about issues in Gillespie because they don't vote there. However, they do support town issues, one example being a referendum to build a new school, which they supported editorially. She believes they can maintain objectivity as long as their community involvement is limited to nonpolitical activity.

"If we were to discover that members of the Chamber of Commerce board are secretly pocketing funds, would we report that fact? You betcha. The bottom line is that the peoples' right to know far outweighs the personal problems that might follow when we report something ugly about the community we serve."

Jim Painter is the editor of the *West Valley View*, a weekly newspaper covering five cities in the Phoenix metropolitan area. Circulation is about 43,000.

"It is certainly possible to become too involved in community organizations, but involvement of some extent is impossible to avoid," he said. "Newspaper editors and publishers have to walk a fine line between being mere observers of the community and being participants in it. By being a resident of a city your paper covers, you are something more than a disinterested observer. As a homeowner and resident of

the city, you take a more personal interest in the actions of the city council, for example. That's human nature."

Painter mentioned that he has been able to avoid joining any of the local civic organizations such as service clubs, veterans' organizations, or school organizations and thus avoided being involved in the infighting and politics that sometimes take place and end up on the pages of the newspaper.

However, Painter said, "It's impossible for a person to work for a community newspaper for any length of time and not become involved to some extent in community affairs. The movers and shakers of any community tend to hang around for a long time, and in the course of attending community functions over the years you develop acquaintances and friendships. We are, after all, human.

"In short, it's impossible not to become involved in community affairs to some extent, but an ethical journalist will make every effort possible to limit his or her personal involvement in the organizations that the newspaper covers."

Bob Estabrook is editor and publisher emeritus of *The Lakeville (Conn.) Journal*. Circulation is about 5,000. Estabrook and his wife, Mary Lou, purchased *The Lakeville Journal* after he spent 25 years on *The Washington Post* as an editorial writer, editor and foreign correspondent. At *The Post*, Estabrook said, the rule was to remain aloof from any association that might compromise — or be viewed as compromising — the independence of the paper. Estabrook found his new environment to be quite different.

"In a small community we quickly found that it is neither possible nor desirable to exist in an ivory tower," he said. "A good editor must *feel* the community about which he reports and comments; he can't be, in effect, an absentee commentator who lives on Mars.

"My rule, evolved by trial and error, is to remember first of all that a journalist ought to report the news, not make it. He should be a chronicler — not, as too often on television — an actor. Thus I avoided any elective public office, or any appointive position in which I thought

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Papers vary on covering suicides

By Mandi Steele

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Weekly newspapers across America have the choice of handling different happenings in their coverage area in their own particular way. From local events such as town elections and school functions to criminal occurrences such as rape or robbery, each individual weekly decides how it wants to cover such topics. One of those topics, maybe a more difficult one to cover, is the act of suicide.

The decision on whether to even cover a suicide is a call the editor has to make.

"I think all those are judgment calls that you have to make on a case-by-case basis," said Jim Keogh, editor of *The Landmark* in Holden, Mass. "If there's some sort of extenuating circumstance attached to it — a popular teacher who's well-known in the community, that's one thing."

He said if the suicide is committed by someone privately in his or her home, it's different. It doesn't have the same ramifications or news value, he said.

"We cover the event if it is 'newsworthy' in the sense that the public needs to know about it, or is already aware of the incident," said Donna Remer, editor of *The Voice* in North Macomb County and southern St. Clair County, Mich. "For example, we covered in detail the suicide of a police officer who shot himself with his revolver in the locker room. We do not cover the 'quiet' suicides of individuals who are not public figures."

Suicides can be difficult, Remer said.

"We had one apparent suicide, a young man found dead in his car in the garage with the motor running," she said.

Later, the coroner ruled it an accidental death, because the young man had been drunk and had simply passed out.

"This is why we do not attach the suicide label until a coroner's determination has been made," Remer said. "We don't want to jump to conclusions."

Ruth Epstein, editor of *The Lakeville (Conn.) Journal*, said her paper either covers suicides in a separate article or addresses them in the police log.

"We do report them all," she said. "We've gotten grief from it; people don't think we should."

She said Lakeville had a fireman commit suicide by the side of a lake, and when the story came out in the paper, some of the family members were upset.

Charlie Meeks, editor of *The Cedar County Republican* in Stockton, Mo., said she will get calls from family members prior to running a story on a particular suicide asking her not to, but she will run the story anyhow.

"I'm pretty sure that they may never want us to run a story on it," she said.

Meeks once ran a juvenile's suicide on the front page and included an early photo of the boy.

"I would not have done that on the front page except that I knew there were rumors going around," she said.

Epstein said her paper is not given a

name if the victim is 16 or younger, so Lakeville's juveniles will not be in the paper at all.

"Generally we don't really cover them [suicides] unless it happens in kind of a public way," said Kathy Farren, editor of *Kendall County Record* in Yorkville, Ill. She said she really isn't sure how the policy came about, but, like a tradition, you follow suit.

Most papers vary in some aspects of their coverage of suicide. Epstein said she doesn't run photos, but will interview friends and family and include how the person committed suicide.

Keogh said he would include how, but would leave out any "gruesome detail."

Most editors agree on that point, wanting to make sure their coverage is "tasteful."

Farren said she doesn't use friends or family for sources when it comes to suicides, but she will use quotes from law enforcement. She won't include a photo of the suicide scene, but might include one of the person.

Remer said she includes a photo if she can get one, and includes any sources she can obtain. "We follow it like any other news story," she said.

Meeks said, as a source for her suicide stories, she will use only law enforcement statements. She said she would be inclined not to go into how the person committed suicide, but if she did include the means, it would be subtle.

"I wouldn't go into graphic details," she said.

Anonymous sources not popular with editors

By Virginia Fairchild
Sophomore Communications Major
Missouri Southern State College

The majority of community newspapers have no formal, written policy on the use of anonymous sources but instead deal with this ethical dilemma on a case-by-case basis.

The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics states that journalists should, "Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability."

It also reads, "Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity."

David Mitchell, editor and publisher of the Pulitzer Prize-winning weekly *The Point Reyes* (Calif.) *Light*, said he doesn't believe that anonymous sources are unethical.

"Sometimes they are the only way you get information," he said. "You have to use judgment."

The Point Reyes Light is published every Thursday and holds a paid circulation of just under 4,300. Mitchell heads a four-person newsroom, which includes himself, a news editor, and two staff writers.

Mitchell said he has no written policy for his newspaper on the use of anonymous sources.

"Our staff is so small you can usually hear each other on the phone," he said. "If something sounds wrong, that I overhear, then we usually stop it there. Other mistakes (about sources in a story) are fixed in the editing process."

He said anonymous sources can be helpful and that their greatest value is the lead they allow into an investigation.

"Most anonymous sources are telling you something with a grain of truth in it," Mitchell said. "But, some are so exaggerated or distorted that it really isn't accurate. In this situation, you would simply use them to see if any truth actually lies behind their story."

Donna Remer, executive editor of *The Voice* and the *Armada Times* newspapers in New Baltimore, Mich., said she might use the information from an anonymous source to get the same information from another quotable source.

The Voice and the *Armada Times* newspa-

pers publish weekly with a total circulation of 61,000.

"We generally do not use anonymous sources in news stories," she said. "We do, however, have an anonymous format for short opinion in our editorial pages.

"Readers can phone, fax, or write in up to 100 words and we will publish it in our 'Speaking Out' column. They do not need to sign their name."

Mitchell said he rarely uses the phrase "anonymous source" in a story.

"I have used anonymous sources numerous times," he said. "But, 95 percent of the time I have given an indicator to who the source is. The only time I would use the actual phrase would be if the matters of the quote had no significance to the person's reputation."

Fred Steiner, editor of *The Bluffton* (Ohio) *News*, said he doesn't have a written policy on using anonymous sources because the issue doesn't arise very often at his newspaper. *The Bluffton News*, a weekly, has a circulation of 2,900.

"It would be difficult for me to quote an anonymous source," he said. "First, because I imagine that the subject matter might be so sensitive that I would probably be making things worse than better. To me, the can of worms I opened is worse after quoting an anonymous source."

Judy Johnson, editor of *The Times of Acadiana* in Lafayette, La., a free alternative news weekly, said she does not publish stories that cite anonymous sources except in the cases of rape victims. *The Times of Acadiana* distributes 33,500 copies to the eight-parish area, known as "Cajun Country."

"This is a policy of our parent company, Gannett," she said. "However, we have based investigations on anonymous sources and used them as background to provide context for a piece."

Johnson said she has used anonymous sources in stories.

"Sometimes you just have to get the story out there to stir the pot and get other people talking," she said.

Elliott Freireich, publisher of *West Valley View*, a free weekly with a circulation of 42,737 in Litchfield, Ariz., said his newspaper doesn't use anonymous sources as a general rule.

"They do little to substantiate a story and they are often the lazy reporter's way out," he said. "In rare cases where there is a compelling reason to run the story but using the source's real name would place them in physical danger, we would give the source a fictitious name and tell our readers the name was fictitious."

Freireich said he would rather not use unnamed sources. He said sometimes it is possible to convince anonymous sources to go on the record.

"If the story is important enough and we have exhausted all other alternatives, we would consider using an unnamed source," he said. "I probably would also recognize that the use of the unnamed source was made after careful deliberation."

"This is not a question of ethics, but it is a question of credibility," Freireich said. "Unnamed sources are not as credible."

Johnson said she doesn't believe anonymous sources are unethical.

"However, I believe that journalists have done a poor job of presenting themselves to the public," she said. "Our recent penchant for tabloid journalism and the awful problems of made-up subjects and of plagiarism have called into question our integrity."

Mitchell said anonymous sources can be overused and that's where the problem begins.

"People love to believe in conspiracy theories," Johnson said. "The recent actions of journalists and the recent timidness of newspapers and their organizations that are publicly traded have made all journalism fodder for conspiracy theories."

"The worst thing for a newspaper is for its readers to consider it part of 'them' and not 'us'," she said. "Too often, recently, that has been an apt consideration."

Mitchell said before a newspaper uses an anonymous source, it should make sure the readers see it as credible.

"Anonymous sources are not unethical," Johnson said. "However, journalists have foregone the right to use them for the foreseeable future."

"Until we rebuild the trust between journalists and readers, we won't be able to use anonymous sources and maintain any kind of credibility."

Some papers allow more latitude in publishing offensive language

By Vince Sweeney

2002 Communications Graduate
Missouri Southern State College

It could be considered one of the toughest decisions an editor has to make. While there is always that difficulty of whether to run a photo of an injured person, printing unsigned letters to the editor or using anonymous sources, printing foul language also tends to be right up there in ethically challenging dilemmas a newspaper editor can face.

Printing foul language seems to vary from newspaper to newspaper. Some editors support this, and others are completely against it.

The term itself tends to leave many unanswered questions.

"It leaves a lot of room for interpretation," said Frank Manley, publisher of *The Milford (N.H.) Cabinet*. "What is foul language?"

Most of the time, though, Manley will make it a point to avoid running anything in his newspaper that could spark controversy.

"In reporting a story, I don't think we use foul language," he said. "I don't see that it would serve a purpose. In a direct quote we quote directly, possibly using dashes if that seemed appropriate."

Tommy McGraw, editor and publisher of *The Sumter County Record-Journal* in Livingston, Ala., would tend to disagree with Manley. He says "yes" to printing foul language if it is necessary.

"If it is vital to the story, showing someone's anger, or lack of regard for who and where he is speaking," McGraw said. "We very seldom use it but have in the past."

Of course there are exceptions to the rule.

"We try not to overburden the reader with a bunch of garbage, but where it is newsworthy it will be used," McGraw continued. "Experience tends to tell you if it's newsworthy. Letters [to the editor] are for the most part not edited at all in our publication. Unless they are slandering someone or us, we ask the writer to send in another letter that will not get us sued."

In a town such as Sallisaw, Okla., where children take an active role in reading the paper because of its Newspapers In Education program, foul language "has no place in such a publication," according to Jim Mayo, publisher of *The Sequoyah County Times*.

"We do not publish foul language in *The Sequoyah County Times* because our readers would find it offensive," he said. "Were we to use it in a story, the language would become the focus of the story in the readers' minds, rather than whatever subject the story was actually about. Our readers do care about what goes into their community paper, and I am sure we would receive many objections to the use of foul language. To use such language would add flavor, but the flavor would be repulsive. I suppose we might someday make an exception to this rule, but we have never come across circumstances to warrant it yet."

In addition to how strongly Mayo thinks his community is against foul language, he cannot recall a time he has come across any controversial words in a letter to the editor. If he ever does, though, he assures there will be typographical devices to substitute what is said.

The Freeman (S.D.) Courier, along with publisher Tim Waltner, agrees with Mayo's stand. Their belief is that the best way to handle foul language is for the reporter to paraphrase the words as best as he or she can.

Unlike *The Sequoyah County Times*, *The Freeman Courier* gives itself a bit more latitude. For example, the paper recently ran a feature story on a local doctor who was retiring. Looking back on his 50 years, he had this to say: "There are so damn many things that are pleasing." In response to the article, several readers said they could "just hear him say that!" There were no problems with that being published.

Other examples of exceptions to its rule might include the town mayor saying "it's time for the bullshit to end." If the KKK or skinheads were rallying to "run the niggers

out of town," this would also be printed, according to Waltner.

In Lafayette, La., things seem to be a bit more on the liberal side. Judy Johnson, editor of *The Times of Acadiana*, a free alternative newsweekly, seems to have no problem with foul language.

"Alternative newspapers grew out of the rich tradition of underground newspapers that flourished in the 1960s," she said. "It was our mission to use as many cuss words as we could, not just in direct quotes but in our own columns and reporting. That has changed somewhat over the years, but is still the operating principle for some alternative newspapers. Not for ours. We don't shy away from such words, but we don't seek them out."

"As far as direct quotes, anything goes. If the guy says 'crap,' we print 'crap.' If he says 'shit,' we print 'shit.' If he says 'fuck,' we print 'f**k.' OK, we're not as radical as we like to think."

Johnson has also worked in mainstream journalism, and is quick to point out that the rules are entirely different. The stronger words such as "shit" and "fuck" would never be seen, she said.

"Any story that contained the words 'masturbation,' 'ejaculation,' or 'vagina' would probably be presented with a large, impossible to miss 'Editor's Note' warning that the story contained graphic language," Johnson said.

While this issue will continue to present a dilemma for many newspapers, Johnson sums everything up by saying it should simply be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

"I tell people that I write and edit a newspaper for adults. We work hard not to include any information about kids younger than college age, because I don't want to encourage them to pick up my paper without Mom or Dad around to read it with them and answer their questions. I mean that. We publish for adults, but mainstream newspapers, weekly or daily, publish for the whole family and have to be aware of that."

Most editors refuse to run anonymous letters to editor

By Jessica Bogle

Sophomore Communications Major
Missouri Southern State College

Letters to the editor often are one of the most interesting parts of the newspaper. Not only does it give the community a way to voice their opinions, but it also gives the editors insight into how the community feels about specific issues.

"Letters to the editor are the most read, discussed, and cussed portions of our newspaper," according to David Burton, a former editor in southwest Missouri.

But what is one to do when he receives a letter that is either not signed or has a request from the writer to remain anonymous? There are many ways of viewing and handling this issue.

"We simply don't print anonymous letters to the editor," says Elliott Freireich, publisher of the *West Valley View* in Litchfield Park, Ariz. "If there is information in such a letter that needs following up, we do that and look for a news story. But we don't print anonymous letters or letters where the author has asked us to withhold his or her name."

"Unless the writer is willing to stand behind his words, the paper ought not to assume responsibility for them," said Robert Estabrook, editor and publisher emeritus at the *Lakeville (Conn.) Journal*. Karen Cord Taylor, editor of *Beacon Hill Times* in Boston, Mass., offers another opinion: "If there is not a signature, how does a reader know we haven't made the letter up?"

"Running anonymous letters to the editor is an easy way to get yourself or the newspaper sued because they are more likely to be filled with misinformation or libel," says Burton, now a civic communications specialist for University of Missouri Outreach and Extension.

Another way of handling an anonymous letter is to contact the writer and discuss dif-

ferent options, one of which is to try to talk the writer into allowing the newspaper to use his or her name.

"If the writer supplies his name but asks not to have it used, I have found in most cases that with a phone call he can be talked into taking responsibility," Estabrook said.

"I think having a policy of needing names on letters forces people to make the decision to sign or not be heard," Freireich pointed out.

Howard Blankman, a retired publisher of the Woodland Villagers Newspapers of Baltimore, Md., offered another suggestion: "I always had an 8-pt. italic footnote at the bottom of the page stating I would use the name *Anonymous* if the writer so requested, but I had to have the writer's name and address for my personal records," he said. "I never ever had to divulge the names, but I felt if it were absolutely necessary I could protect myself from a legal or libel lawsuit. Also, I did contact the 'anonymous' writer, explaining this, and attempt to have him/her show a true commitment and sign on, although most did chicken out and request the anonymous tag. I personally felt the 'anonymous' signature detracted from the impact of the letter."

One other option is to obtain a release for the letter from the writer.

"The editorial page editor would have to meet face to face with the letter writer and probably obtain some kind of release letter, signed in full by the writer, authorizing publication of the letter," said Judy Johnson, editor of *The Times of Acadiana* in Lafayette, La. "This authorization would be kept on file for as long as the paper maintains files."

Some letters, however, may contain important information about relevant news stories.

"They may call attention to situations that ought to be investigated — in other words, use the anonymous letter as a tip to be verified," Estabrook said. "Once or twice, an anonymous letter has come in where I might make a phone call or two to check out the story."

"We take whatever we can from anonymous letters — you never know WHERE a story may come from — and throw them away," says Jeffrey Peyton, publisher of *The Shenandoah Valley Observer* in Charlottesville, Va.

Tim Nekritz, former city editor of the *Oswego (N.Y.) Palladium-Times*, said he usually didn't find anonymous letters particularly useful because they were often rambling and incoherent.

"If there was anything with a seeming shred of truth we would investigate it via our sources who would 'know things' but not necessarily be involved in the potential story," said Nekritz, now the associate director of public affairs at the State University of New York-Oswego. "I think a few times something seemed credible enough that we contacted the person involved saying something like, 'this is going to sound crazy, but ...' which was usually followed by a laugh and a denial. The person generally appreciated being contacted, as opposed to just running something of that nature. In my experience, I think only one letter actually had any truth to it, so with a small staff it made sense to reduce the chances of chasing wild geese."

Overall, an anonymous letter to the editor seems to cause more work for editors. It may be as simple as contacting the writer of the letter, or it may involve digging into the story behind it.

Payton, who normally throws anonymous letters away, confesses that he has printed a few such letters.

"However, the author of the letter(s) in question was known to me, and I chose to run an important letter much in the same manner I would have chosen to protect an anonymous source or whistleblower," he said.

As Burton states as his philosophy for letters to the editor, "A person of integrity does not have to hide when they speak, or write."

Editors divided on whether staffers can hold public office

By Kayla Nash

Junior Communications Major
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For a metropolitan-sized newspaper, the decision for journalists to run for public office is pretty cut and dried. Those papers do not know their readers by name, do not need every advertiser they have to survive, and do not have a lack of individuals available in the city's leadership pool.

The more localized the paper is, however, the more difficult the public involvement issue becomes. Bill Devlin, publisher of the *Steele County Press* in Finley, N.D., said he would certainly allow and encourage members of his staff to run for a public office. His weekly paper carries a circulation of about 1,400.

"In a weekly newspaper in a small town you need to be involved with the community and this is one important way that your business can be involved, if they can fill a need," he said.

M. Dickey Drysdale, editor and publisher of *The Herald of Randolph* (Vt.), agrees by saying that holding a public office can even strengthen a weekly paper. *The Herald of Randolph* services about 6,000 people in 15 towns in central Vermont. He said holding a public office can demonstrate to the paper's writers the "real-life experience of public service" and it can make them more aware of the issues and the processes inside the community.

"It can also strengthen the paper by giving it credibility for being interested, involved, and committed to its community," he said.

Although Tim Waltner, publisher of the weekly *Freeman Courier* that serves 2,000 readers in southeastern South Dakota, thinks community involvement is essential for a community paper, he crosses the line at running for political office.

"The issue is objectivity, both real and perceived," he said. "If a reporter, editor or publisher sits on the school board, there is real danger of readers feeling the reporting is influenced or biased or that the reporter, editor or publisher has privileged access to the press."

However, Waltner and Barbara Vice, editor and publisher of the *Drumright* (Okla.) *Gusher*, both agree that the limited number of leaders in small towns adds another factor to the public office dilemma.

"In a community as small as ours, there is a shortage of willing, capable, intelligent, educated persons to serve the community on the city council, school board, chamber of commerce, etc.," she said. "If I or a staff member were willing to serve in a capacity where we could be of benefit to the community, and no one else was willing to do it, then yes, I believe we have an obligation."

However, even with a small number of potential town leaders, Waltner's opinion still stands.

"And even though we might feel we

could obtain our objectivity if a staff member ran for public office, the perception of our readers is the overriding consideration," he said. "The specter of split loyalties — the public's right to know vs. accountability to voters — is too serious to ignore."

Robert Mihalek, editor of the weekly *Yellow Springs News* that serves about 1,800 people in Yellow Springs, Ohio, also said that running for an office could lead to a loss of credibility.

"About 12 years ago, a former business partner of mine at the *News* was a member of the Yellow Springs Village Council. When he had the opportunity to join the paper and become one of its owners, he resigned from the council," he said. "His decision was the right thing to do."

According to Vice, there is one condition to holding a public office and working on a newspaper staff. She said there should be definite lines drawn between the office holder and the others on the paper's staff. As a school board member, Vice said she would never report or be used as a source in any school board story.

"And, if I got caught up in a controversial story, I would expect to be written about just like any other school board member — perhaps more so because I would be held to a higher standard," she said. "Trust between the newspaper and the community would be vital, and it would be very important to report accurately, fairly, and honestly, because folks would be watching with a magnifying glass — as they should be."

Most editors refuse to allow advertisers to influence content

By J.R. Ledford

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Contrary to what many would like to believe, disseminating fair and accurate news is only the second objective of a newspaper. Making money is the first.

The problem is keeping the two objectives separate. This happens when an advertiser attempts to affect a newspaper's news content.

Newspapers rely on a solid base of advertisers for revenue. For many community newspapers, advertising revenue can be more difficult to obtain as there are often fewer businesses. It is not uncommon for a problem to arise in such an environment.

It appears, though, the standard is to stay true to the news as the threat to withdraw advertising is usually nothing more.

"Advertisers always try to affect the news content of the paper," said *West Valley View* editor Jim Painter. "Hardly a day goes by that I don't pick up my ringing phone to be greeted by, 'Hi, I've been an advertiser in your newspaper for 10 years and I think you should do a story about...' or 'I think you should do a story about such and such event.'"

The West Valley View in Litchfield, Ariz., has not held any punches despite advertising threats.

Painter said in its critical, early days, the *View* had a large account with a local car dealer who ran a full-page ad on the back page each week.

"The owner's son was charged with selling a kilo of cocaine to an undercover DEA agent," Painter said. "Because of the family's prominence in the community, his arrest was a front-page story."

The advertiser pulled his account, but eventually renewed his contract.

"Advertisers frequently have pulled their ads to express displeasure with the editorial content of the newspaper," Painter said. "In

most cases, they eventually come back because they realize that their business benefits from advertising in a newspaper that people actually read, and people actually read a paper that has real, hard-hitting news, not just PR pap force-fed to us by advertisers."

Solid advertising often comes from a local automobile dealership, or even several dealerships. *The Voice* in New Baltimore, Mich., experienced a backlash from car dealers when it ran an article telling shoppers how to check out dealers' used car prices on the Internet. As a result, most area car dealers pulled their advertising.

"We lost thousands of dollars as a result of this protest, but the dealers also lost money by not having their product advertised in our paper," said Donna Remer, *The Voice* executive editor. "Eventually, they all came back to us."

Remer said *The Voice* is a total market coverage paper and typically runs 60-65 percent advertising. She said she has never given into an advertiser's pressures. Pulling a story that would offend an advertiser is not something she would consider at *The Voice*.

"I have had experience at other papers earlier in my career, however, where editorial standards were not up to standard," Remer said.

At one such newspaper, she said a local grocery store with a large advertising account received special treatment when it came to editorial content.

"That usually amounted to giving the advertiser more publicity than other businesses in the community, such as photographing the store's Little League team every May," she said.

Remer said the newspaper never had to pull a negative story about the grocery store, because it would never have been written in the first place.

"Prior restraint, I believe, could be the term applied here with regard to censorship," she said.

Real estate can be another consistent

source of advertising revenue. Despite the fact Dave Ambrose has owned the *Gillespie* (Ill.) *Area News* for only six years, he realizes the importance of not giving into the pressures.

"We recently had a real estate broker pull all of his advertising after we reported that he was named as a defendant in a lawsuit," Ambrose said. "The ads we used to run for him now appear in a competitor's newspaper with less circulation three miles down the road from us."

He said he has experienced an array of views by advertisers. Advertising was not cancelled when the newspaper published an advertiser's arrest for marijuana possession. Ambrose said he told the advertiser the story would be treated no differently than that of anyone else who had been arrested for the same charge.

"I believe he respected our position," he said. "The backlash he expected against his business never materialized and he continues to be an advertiser with us."

Ambrose said he has never held a story because of an advertiser's threats, but he would be open to holding an editorial in certain situations.

"Often, the purpose of an editorial is to affect change, and if that change can be accomplished without editorial comment, I feel we have served our purpose," he said. "As the old saying goes, sometimes the most effective editorials are never published."

Bill Haupt, former owner of *The Lodi* (Wis.) *Enterprise*, said the newspaper aims for a 50/50 split between news and advertising.

"Yes, I believe advertisers always influence coverage to a certain degree," he said. "It's a consideration any honest publisher will tell you. The publisher must decide where that line is drawn."

He said the *Enterprise* has never given into an advertiser's pressure to hold a story. Advertisers have quit supporting the paper, though, when it published offensive articles.

"If a guy is spending money with you and he suggests that you cover the community corn boil at his restaurant, would you consider his request more than the restaurant owner who doesn't advertise with you?" Haupt asked. "Yes, you probably would."

Jim Mayo, publisher of the *Sequoyah County Times* in Sallisaw, Okla., said he does his best not to allow advertisers to control news content.

"No advertiser ever caused us to consciously change a story," Mayo said. "However, at some subconscious level, an advertiser — or advertisers — may have had some impact on how we handled a story."

He said the *Sequoyah County Times* does not treat advertisers any differently than anyone else.

While never having held a story because of an advertiser, Mayo said the repercussions have been minimal.

"We've had several threats of this over the years, but in only a case or two did the advertiser actually stop advertising," he said.

Advertisers' attempting to sway news coverage is not restricted within the borders of the United States. Eugene McGee, managing edi-

tor of *The Longford Leader* in Longford, Ireland, said it is his policy that news items concerning an advertiser will still be published as long as the story is genuinely in the public interest.

"On a couple of occasions, the advertiser did withdraw their advertising for a short while, but because we are the main paper in our area, they found they were punishing themselves more than us and they soon came back to advertise," McGee said.

"Obviously, smaller newspapers are more likely to be influenced by the clout which large advertisers have in this regards, but I have found that once the newspaper takes a stand, even if it involves loss of advertising in the short term, the word soon gets out that the paper does not bow to advertisers' demands and the problem tends to evaporate after that."

Bob Estabrook has seen the threats at both extremes of newspapers. He has worked for *The Washington Post* and *The Lakeville (Conn.) Journal*. Estabrook once worked on the editorial page for *The Washington Post* when a large advertiser threatened to cancel an account if he did not change a critical editorial in the next edition. The editor and publisher were out of town, and Estabrook and his col-

leagues were forced to make the decision.

"We concluded that we could not cave in before that kind of ultimatum even if our jobs might be on the line," Estabrook said. "The advertiser did indeed cancel all advertising in the *Post* for at least a year, costing the paper some hundreds of thousands of dollars, but the publisher never reproached me in any way."

Estabrook was also the editor and publisher from of *The Lakeville Journal* from 1971 to 1986. He still continues to consult for the paper and write a weekly column.

He said he looks twice before crossing the publication road when an involved advertiser threatens to cancel its account or even sue.

"Our policy has been, and is, to take another look to be sure that we have not been unfair, then go ahead and print the story in accordance with its news interest," he said.

He also said advertisers have cancelled accounts, but no more than a couple have been permanent terminations.

"This is painful, but we sell advertising, not news content, and we have to determine the news values of the paper," Estabrook said. "Our own self-respect is worth more than any advertisement."

Community involvement from page 5

did belong to the Rotary Club, which produced a lot of news, and played in the town band, but I made clear in all such associations that my first responsibility was as an independent journalist irrespective of my membership."

Estabrook mentioned that when he and his wife first arrived in Lakeville, the town clerk, a very partisan Republican, advised them that if they wanted to be seen as independent, they shouldn't register with either of the major political parties. The Estabrooks took that advice and registered to vote, but were listed as unaffiliated.

"What I am saying, really, is that a community editor probably cannot and should not avoid all involvements, but the involvements ought to be acknowledged and publicly identified for readers to see. Beyond that, he ought to have a sense of fairness coupled with a sense of detachment. That seems to have worked for us in promoting at least respect, if not agreement, from the more extreme partisans."

Jim Mayo is the publisher of *The Sequoyah County Times*, published twice a

week in Sallisaw, Okla. Circulation is about 6,500.

"The question you pose is one faced by every weekly editor or publisher," Mayo said. "I take the position that I must be involved in civic work because it is part of the job of this newspaper to make our community and county a better place to live. As a result of this position, I have held office in local organizations, and I have served on regional and state boards and commissions.

"In all my years at the *Times*, I have never had a complaint that I favored one organization over another in the news columns. I think the reason is people know our newspaper will give proper and complete news coverage to all organizations that seek it from us."

Mayo said about 25 years ago, some of the staff members at the newspaper were involved in a local community theater group. A point came when Mayo thought the news coverage of the group had become excessive. He had not received any complaints that the coverage of the

group was shorting other worthy organizations, but came to the realization that the coverage the paper was giving it was out of proportion to its importance. He visited with the staff members involved, the coverage was toned down, and the problem came to an end.

"A good case can be made for a publisher or editor to refrain from involvement in outside activities," Mayo said. "In a metro environment, this is probably the best way, but conditions in small towns are much different than they are in metro areas. We are close to our readers, and the communication is more personal. Remaining aloof is the easier way to handle this problem, but this shortchanges the community of valuable talents, assuming newspaper leaders have any. This can be tricky.

"I must remember at all times that my first allegiance is to our readers. So far, by keeping that guiding principle always in mind and acting accordingly, I have been able to avoid problems."

Walking a fine line: Editors always cautious of offending advertisers

By Tasha Jones

Senior Communications Major
Missouri Southern State College

Ask a reader what the bottom line of a newspaper is, and he or she will probably say "truth." Ask anyone who works for a newspaper and they will say "money." This is obvious because even telling the truth costs money. That is the side of a newspaper the reader rarely sees, but it is a reality that sometimes bites an editor in the behind. How ethical is your community newspaper? Do the editors bend the rules? Will they give favoritism to one person or advertiser and not another in order to stay above water? Or will your newspaper stay between the lines in business as well as reporting? Many newspapers face ethical dilemmas, and oftentimes doing the right thing costs them money. So in the battle for money and truth, which would most editors pick? Has your staff ever made an editorial decision based on the bottom line of your newspaper?

Frank Manley, publisher of *The Cabinet Press*, Milford, N.H., made the answer seem simple, maybe too simple.

"No. Fortunately we have not been placed in what I would consider difficult positions regarding this," he said. "I would like to think we would stick with the high ground."

While several newspapers may wish they had this same answer, the fact is that many newspapers often find themselves with such a dilemma. Whether it is an advertiser who got a DWI, has a son or daughter who made the news in an "unflattering" manner, or maybe an advertiser's company is making the top story for some sort of scam, the newspaper must deliberate. If it publishes, it will more than likely lose that money. If it doesn't, it is covering up the news and discrediting the newspaper.

Keith Green, editorial adviser for the *Ruidoso* (N.M.) *News*, says every small newspaper should strive for an expanded advertising base to eliminate the possibility of giving an advertiser that much power. Green tells of a time when he worked for one of New Mexico's largest weeklies and its advertising market consisted mainly of two grocery stores.

"They represented about 40 percent of the weekly paper's revenue at the time," he said. "And one of the store managers was an alcoholic."

"I prayed that he never would be picked up for driving under the influence so that I had to make a hard choice, and he wasn't."

Green said "only the operator of a weak paper might be tempted."

"...If he is, the paper will not go far; word inevitably spreads, and all respect is lost in the community."

Charlyne Berens, assistant professor in the news-editorial department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Journalism, published a weekly, along with her husband, from 1976-1990. Berens believes just because something happens, it is not always news worthy. She said she sometimes had to publish something she knew "would not be popular." But she said they never held back on something they felt was important.

"Not everything is important, though," Berens said. "And we probably did change our minds on some things that weren't worth doing battle over."

"My philosophy for newswriting is that you need to pick your battles. Not everything is worth a fight. Save your ammunition for the things that ARE worth standing up for."

Harry Hix, Engleman/Livermore Professor of Community Journalism at the University of Oklahoma, believes the way to make more money is through the reader, and then in turn, the advertiser.

"Number of subscribers is a key factor in attracting advertising, the key item affecting the bottom line," Hix said.

Hix, a former newspaper publisher in Tennessee, said he "regularly chose to include human interest features, school coverage (plays, honor rolls, awards, etc.) sports, and the Chamber of Commerce...all of which were done with readership in mind."

Hix also admits he made decisions on stories involving advertisers.

"All editors do," he said. "Sometimes that decision is to run a story regardless of whether advertising will be lost. Other times, the decision is not to run a story in order to keep the advertising."

One journalist had a lot to say about the issue, believing "it is one that goes to the heart of journalistic ethics, and is faced by almost every editor or publisher, especially in smaller communities."

Richard McCord, founder, editor, and publisher of the *Santa Fe Reporter*, as well as author of *The Chain Gang*, knows the pressures an advertiser can put on a community newspaper.

McCord says his newspaper was often on the verge of going out of business and he and his staff were getting by on salaries of \$100 per week. McCord said pressure to give advertisers special treatment began right away, and often was intense.

McCord and the staff made a decision to start the *Reporter* "to practice very high standards of journalism."

"And if the only way we could keep the *Reporter* going was to sacrifice the standards we believed in, then the *Reporter* would, sadly, not keep going," he said.

"If the only way I can do what I want to do is by not doing what I want to do, then I am not doing what I want to do," was a little aphorism I came up with to explain our situation."

McCord said everyone figured out the *Reporter* was not there to practice shoddy journalism.

"The community came to understand that the *Reporter* had no particular ax to grind, was tough but fair, was a good newspaper, was independent of the local power structure, and had the good of Santa Fe at heart," he said. "Although we never got rich, the *Reporter's* financial fortunes improved steadily, without the sacrifice of our principles."

McCord did say the *Reporter* had special supplements "specifically designed to attract extra advertising." But the *Reporter* made sure there was a separation between these supplements and the newspaper.

"We did not try to disguise their commercial nature," he said. "But if we started running stories just to please advertisers, we would not be upholding our standards."

Editors divided on allowing sources to read stories prior to publication

By Hilary Haddan

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Day after day, the typical journalist finds several story ideas to use in that day's or that week's paper. Some of these stories provide humor, some of them advice, some of them offer the feature angle which may be anything from a profile of a local store owner to a child who was born three months early. These stories usually demand no timeliness and no one is worried whether they will have to lose sleep — or a friend, over the article.

Other times, however, these stories may contain much harder news such as the firing of a high school principal or reasons behind a baby being left in a dumpster. When these stories are assigned, the rookie interviewer, which is the reporter, may wonder if he or she should let the interviewee read the story before it's printed, just to be sure of facts. And sometimes the interviewee will ask to see the story. Whatever the reason and whoever the person, opinions vary. They vary from state to state, even county to county.

Have you ever allowed a source to read a story prior to publication? The answer to this can go from one extreme to another.

Kathy Farren is the co-owner of four weekly newspapers near Chicago. These newspapers include the *Sandwich Record*, *Plano Record*, *Oswego Ledger-Sentinel* and *Kendall County Record*. She is also editor of three of these papers, whose total circulation equals 17,700.

Farren said she has never, nor will she ever, let a source read a story before it is printed. "I can't recall a single case in 30 years where we have allowed anyone to read a story beforehand. If someone is concerned about what they are being quoted as saying, we will read back their own direct quotes to them, but that's about it."

Generally, she said her staff of reporters is advised not to tell anyone interviewed what the focus of the article will be. This prevents questions ever even being asked.

"We seldom get requests anymore for an advance look at the story, and I don't think anyone has ever refused to be interviewed if we have declined," Farren said.

Judy Johnson, editor of the weekly *The Times of Acadiana* in Lafayette, La., has opposing views for her free, 33,500-circulation newspaper.

"I've never had a problem letting a source see a story before it prints, especially if it's a story laden with technical data," she said. "A misplaced 'of' or 'to' can render a statement meaningless and an expert can help prevent that from happening.

"I make the determination on a case-by-case basis, however. If I'm working on a story that is going to ruffle feathers, chances are I will not let sources see the story. I will, however, review with them direct quotes they have given me (sometimes starting the fight early that sources love to wage: 'I never said that!')"

Johnson said her overall answer is to let a source read a story before it is published. But it also depends on whether she thought the source could help make the story more accurate and clear.

"And as I explain to anyone who gets to see a story early, I've only agreed to let you see it," she said. "I never agreed to make any changes you suggest. I also make it clear to the source that if word of this story leaks out to any other media, it will be one of the coldest days in hell before they ever get such courtesy from me again."

Bill Devlin, publisher of the weekly *Steele County Press* in Finley, N.D., circulation 1,400, said he has let sources read stories before publication on occasion.

"It happens sometimes with computer or Internet-type stories," he said. "Once in a while a reporter will let a person, who is the subject of a human-interest type story, preview it to check facts, but that doesn't happen very often. Usually it is with a young reporter who wants to confirm their notes."

Devlin said there are no such situations when it comes to stories concerning town meetings or other similar events. He said he would never allow a public official to read a story prior to publication.

Brad Martin, editor of the weekly *Hickman County Times* in Centerville, Tenn., circulation 5,600, also says it depends. Martin has allowed someone other than his staff to read a story before publication only once. This instance occurred when he covered a story about a sub-

ject he knew little about, gas-fired electric generators. He said because of his ignorance of the topic, he believed it necessary to ask a community leader who had also seen the generators to read the story to make sure everything was correct.

"Otherwise, I don't do it, and wouldn't allow it," Martin said. "The reporter's job is to get information and get it right. If he or she does his or her best to answer the pertinent questions, then that's what a reporter should do. It's up to the reporter's editor to scrub the story clean. It's not up to anyone else.

"If a reporter cannot trust himself to get the story right, then he or she either needs to do more reporting or needs to find another line of work."

Another view with this shared opinion is from Tom Vaughan, editor of the weekly *Manco Times-Tribune* in the Mancos Valley of southwest Colorado. His paper has a circulation of 1,000. Although Vaughan has never allowed a source to read a story prior to publication, he did "read an editorial in fairly developed draft form to a person who would be affected by it."

He said he has also received letters to the editor complaining about treatment by a businessperson or official. "My policy is that people have the responsibility to try to resolve those problems with the individual involved before complaining about them in public."

Vaughan said in response to this and with the knowledge of the letter writer, he gave a copy of the letter to the person being complained about and asked for his response. "My recollection...is that the complainant received satisfaction and the letter was not printed."

Richard McCord, the former editor and publisher of the 18,000-circulation weekly the *Santa Fe (N.M.) Reporter*, has at one time or another allowed a source to read a story before publication but said he discourages the practice. He said the only time he would consider it would be when the article dealt with scientific information or information the reporter was new to.

McCord, however, has found it beneficial on occasion to let a source read notes taken during an interview to clarify any misunderstandings. He said there is always the possibility of the classic phrase "I never said that!" coming up.

No exceptions made:

All names must be included in police reports

By Vince Sweeney
2002 Communications Graduate
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It's basically a unanimous decision.

While some might choose not to go by the book, the overall consensus is that no exceptions can be made.

If a close friend or a big advertiser went to an editor or publisher of a newspaper asking that his or her name be left out of a police report, what would be the response?

It would be easy just to throw the report in the trash and not jeopardize a friendship or the financial aspect of the newspaper. However, whether they are friends or loyal advertisers, it is usually a common practice to give these individuals the same kind of treatment anyone else would receive.

"A good physician says he treats every patient as if it is his own mother," said David Cox, managing editor of the *Villager Journal* in Cherokee Village, Ark. "A good newspaperman must treat even his own mother as if she is anyone else. Whether it's a big advertiser, a good friend or even a family member who makes the police report, you treat him or her exactly as you would anyone else. If we aren't willing to do that, the readership will quickly catch on and we lose our credibility. A newspaper must guard its credibility to stay in business."

From personal experience, Cox has lost advertisers by mentioning in stories that a business owner or employee was facing criminal charges. They would eventually come back, though, because of "the revenue their ads generate."

"And I have also hurt friends' feelings when they earned bad press and I gave it to them. When it happens close to home it forces you to make damn sure you have the

facts right, and that makes you more careful the next time you do a story of that nature."

In Litchfield Park, Ariz., Elliott Freireich, publisher of the *West Valley View*, recalls a time when a friend of his asked if the paper would not run his DWI arrest.

"One of the things I told him was that my attorney told me that if we did selective publication, we could be sued if we refused anyone else who wanted his or her name withheld," Freireich said. "Also, it comprises the integrity of the newspaper because sooner or later (and probably sooner) someone will find out that we don't publish all of the arrests."

Robert Estabrook, former editor and publisher of *The Lakeville (Conn.) Journal*, believes there is no reason to give into the temptation of taking the easy way out.

"I think it is folly to respond to pressure and omit names from the police report," Estabrook said. "Once a newspaper does this it is playing favorites and inviting loss of confidence in its fairness. In the rare event that the editor is convinced that it would be in the public interest not to disclose a name, he is honor bound to acknowledge this and explain the reasons to the readers."

Estabrook often finds that even though a person or advertiser might not agree with a decision, he or she does understand once given a good reason.

"When I first started out, I had to cover a story about a man who molested his step-daughter," said Karl Kling, editor of *The Milford (Mich.) Times*. "He was charged and sentenced to 25 years for the four-year ordeal. His wife, the girl's mother, was our sales manager. We still ran the story and used his name, which in a small town was

very easy to link to our employee. I feared my friend and co-worker would be furious at me forever, but I knew my job."

Kling and this woman are still friends today, but whether they would be is not the point, because "the truth cannot be for sale."

Things are no different in Hardwick, Vt. Ross Connelly, editor and publisher of *The Hardwick Gazette*, remembers times when his newspaper has lost advertising. But before people get angry and retaliate, they should think about the obvious.

"The police report is a public document and police tickets and citations are public records," Connelly said. "If one's name appears in a police report, it is public."

"There is no ethical dilemma here regarding publication, if the newspaper publishes a police report and uses names. Any publisher or editor who withholds a name because of fear or favor is practicing public relations, not journalism. A newspaper does not make the news, it reports it."

Fortunately for David Green, editor and publisher of the *Morenci (Mich.) Observer*, the situation only comes up "perhaps once in five or six years."

"I hear the request made every now and then," Green said. "I explain that we can't pick and choose which items to print from the police report."

If nothing else, a news editor will almost always believe that names from police reports are not to be omitted.

"If you are a newspaperman, you have an obligation, first and foremost, to your readership," Freireich says. "This does not allow you to consider withholding the name. If you are a businessman who happens to publish newspapers as your business, you might look at the financial ramifications first and remove the name."

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 263
 (2) Paid In-County Subscriptions (Based on Form 3541) (Include advertiser's proof and exchange copies)
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 (4) Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS
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 (1) Outside-County as Stated on Form 3541
 64
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e. Free Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers or other means)
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17. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner
 Chad Sebbins Editor

18. I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this form or who omits material or information requested on the form may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including civil penalties).

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- Complete and file one copy of this form with your postmaster annually on or before October 1. Keep a copy of the completed form for your records.
- In cases where the stockholder or security holder is a trustee, include in items 10 and 11 the name of the person or corporation for whom the trustee is acting. Also include the names and addresses of individuals who are stockholders who own or hold 1 percent or more of the total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities of the publishing corporation. In item 11, if none, check the box. Use blank sheets if more space is required.
- Be sure to furnish all circulation information called for in item 15. Free circulation must be shown in items 5d, e, and f.
- Item 15b, Copies not Distributed, must include (1) newspaper copies originally stated on Form 3541, and returned to the publisher; (2) estimated returns from news agents, and (3), copies for office use, leftovers, spoiled, and all other copies not distributed.
- If the publication had Precedents authorization as a general or regular publication, this Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation must be published; it must be printed in any issue in October or, if the publication is not published during October, the first issue printed after October.
- Item 16, indicate the date of the issue in which this Statement of Ownership will be published.
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Failure to file or publish a statement of ownership may lead to suspension of Periodicals authorization.

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for newspeople*

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