

First-Ever

Guide to Online Media Ethics

by Dean Ceppos' MC 4090 class
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NEWS JUDGMENT AND CONFLICTS

1. Decide what you are: an entertainment site, a news site or something else entirely.
2. Be an independent voice.
3. Ask your organization if there is a difference between online and print standards. If so, be clear about what those differences are.
4. Cover stories that are important. (Ask yourself: Who cares?)
5. When trying to decide if a story is worth covering, ask yourself if it is just prurient or if it is actually newsworthy.
6. Think about the effects of what you write.
7. The standard for deciding whether to use a victim's name (or perhaps even a photo) is different for public figures than for individuals who are not widely known.

8. Beware of identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.
9. Do not become bored with “routine” stories. They may not be so routine to readers who need information.
10. Headlines and teasers must accurately represent the information presented in the actual story.
11. Give context to your stories. Especially with follow-up stories, bear in mind that many people did not see or read the original story.
12. Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, ethnicity, etc.
13. Examine your own cultural values, then try to filter them out of your journalism, PR, advertising and/or political communication practices.
14. Avoid covering subjects with which you are personally involved.
15. When aggregating, keep two questions in focus: What are the rules for aggregation and what are you trying to accomplish with your aggregation project?
16. Think about your role before you post anonymous comments.

1. Value transparency.
2. Be honest, transparent and behave in a way that is mutually beneficial.
3. Media organizations should explain their actions.
4. Make corrections quickly and prominently.
5. Make corrections as interesting as the original story and use them across as many platforms as possible.
6. Do not be afraid to post your evidence.
7. Do not hide evidence of a product's dangers, even if you are part of a public relations team representing the product.
8. Listen when critics question a story. Consider letting your readers know how you reported the story in the first place.
9. If you are business-savvy enough to rework a story of yours so that it can be sold to another publication, be sure that the publication you are targeting does not think it is completely exclusive. Be honest with all aspects of the merchandising and writing of your story.

TRANSPARENCY

SOURCING ETHICS

1. Be super-obvious and clear about your role when interviewing people who are not familiar with the media.
2. Question the motives of sources.
3. Know your source and do not worry about following his or her agenda. Remember your own agenda, which is to get to the bottom of the problem.
4. Gather a pool of sources. Be sure to listen to all of the diverse voices that should appear in a fair and accurate news article.
5. Value privacy rights of sources in journalism and clients in PR and advertising.
6. Be sure that anonymous sources in stories and anonymous commenters are verifiable.

KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE

1. Put your reader and/or client interest above your own.
2. Online stories give readers the option for passive viewing, but print headlines come off as more aggressive. Remember that, while readers make a conscious choice to go online, we leave print choices to the editors.
3. Word choice is important. A word used incorrectly can come across as both inaccurate and offensive.
4. Know your community; values differ.

1. Avoid “copy-and-paste” errors at all costs.
2. Do not let ego get in the way of giving credit.
3. When in doubt, attribute. Links are a great device for online attribution.
4. Generally, you can get out of an attribution bind as long as you include a link. Links make almost everything OK.
5. The rules are somewhat different for PR and news. PR folks often do not mind if a journalist uses their words without attribution. But doing that seems like plagiarism to many journalists.

PLAGIARISM

WHEN PROBLEMS ARISE

1. In an ethical dilemma, take a deep breath and stop and think about what you are doing.
2. Put principle over personal issues.
3. Remember that every situation is different. What was right in one instance is not necessarily always correct.
4. Your organization should have a policy on taking down stories that have already been posted.
5. The issue of "un-publishing" electronically is fuzzy, depending partially on whether the item is already in print and how important the item is. A quote about a college student drinking might not be worth deleting; a case involving public safety might well be.
6. When unsure about running a story or photo, talk to every stakeholder. But the decision still ultimately belongs to the news organization.

1. Photos, including video, are more powerful than words.
2. Preserve the integrity of news photos. Avoid “improving” the picture by making the scene different from what it really was.
3. Ensure every photo is real and is accurately described.
4. Your organization should have both legal and ethical policies on when you need permission to shoot.
5. Remember that pictures often carry a lot of emotion, so aim for impact but avoid sensationalism. Strive for relevance, not only emotion.
6. Beware of running photos only because they are the “perfect” pictures.
7. Respect families; be sure the families are aware of the death of their relative if you will run a photo of him or her.
8. Photos of Americans in tragic circumstances are more emotional for many U.S. viewers and readers than are photos of non-Americans. Whether you agree or disagree, keep that in mind. Better yet, use good judgment in picturing everyone who is in a tragic circumstance.

PHOTOS AND ART

1. Quoting social media should be a last resort.
2. What is on Facebook often is fair game for news reporting. Beware of what you post -- and, if you are taking material from a Facebook page, beware of what you use.
3. Twitter is a good communications method, but how do we know it is accurate? Tell readers how unreliable the information might be.
4. If Twitter operates within the First Amendment, then consider if Twitter should take down "bad" accounts. This includes those of terrorists.
5. Do everything in your power to check that the person you believe is tweeting or posting Facebook statuses really is.
6. It is almost too easy to express opinions on Twitter. Be careful, especially if you are using your employer's Twitter account.

SOCIAL MEDIA



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