

Ethics: Journalism's 'Underpants'

Bob Williams, former Reporter for the Raleigh News & Observer, July 3, 2007

I consider my ethics to be my journalistic underpants. I put them on every day and I feel very uncomfortable without them. They need to fit me well and move as I do. If they are too tight they will bind and chafe. If they are too loose they will droop down, either tripping me up or exposing my ass. Like most men, I hate to throw away my underpants - even when they become old and a bit frayed around the edges. It takes a long time to break them in properly. And my ethics, like my underpants, are very personal. I can wear the same style, color or size as someone else, but it is a bad idea to actually wear their underpants. I need to examine my underwear every day and make sure it is clean and relatively free of holes. I know I could probably show up for work without my underpants for years and most people would never notice. But then again, you never know when you might be in an accident. All of this is not to say that ethics are simple. Good journalistic ethics are complex and require constant care. They are definitely not something you should let your mother pick out for you. Ethics form the foundation on which is built the basic social contract that has to exist between the credible journalist and the public he or she serves. The stronger that foundation, the stronger the ties between writer and reader. But that strong foundation is rarely obvious to the reader, or for that matter the writer. Ethics almost always remain in the background, usually only becoming evident when there is a problem. So what are the values that comprise and hold together our journalistic underpants? For me there are many. Some are vital, while others appear to be little more than decoration. But they are all necessary for me to feel confident and competent in my role as a daily newspaperman.

FAIRNESS. I believe this is the most important value I have as both a journalist and a person. I am constantly questioning whether I am being fair to the people I am writing about. Have I portrayed their thoughts and words fairly, or have I adulterated them in some way? Would I be comfortable reading my story to the people involved? I think one of the biggest compliments a journalist can receive is to be called tough but fair by someone he has written about in an uncomplimentary way.

BALANCE. Many journalists think balance and fairness are the same, but I am not one. I believe it is possible to write a perfectly balanced story that is totally unfair. To me, balance is what you have to fall back on when you are not able to be totally fair. It usually involves calling the so-called "other side" to get their expected response. Technically, that provides balance, but it rarely enlightens the reader or advances the public debate.

ACCURACY. To me, accuracy is much more than simply making sure I quote someone correctly or spell his or her name right. It also means I put their words and opinions in the proper context. It means I don't embellish. It means that I report on people and events as truthfully as possible. I don't tidy up what happened to fit neatly into whatever angle me or

my editor might want the story to take. It means my writing is not tainted by whatever personal feelings I might have about the selected subject or people.

DIGNITY. The dignity of the people I write about is very important to me. So is the dignity of my readers and my newspaper. That does not mean that I am not an aggressive journalist, but it means I try not to take cheap shots. I have found that most hard-hitting stories are strengthened when the reporter shows respect toward the people or institutions under examination. Being mean usually hurts your credibility with the reader.

HUMANITY. In the movie "Absence of Malice," there is a great scene where a wise old city editor talks about being a reporter. He says he knows how to report the news and he knows how not to hurt people, but he doesn't know how to do both at the same time. This is a chillingly true statement. The best journalism usually hurts someone, often without meaning to. To me, humanity means I don't hurt the innocent or those who have no idea what they are getting into when they talk to a reporter. Good journalists have a special responsibility when it comes to the unsophisticated. We have to tell them clearly they could be doing great harm to themselves without even knowing it. Avoid the leading questions. And leave the grieving alone. You can come back later if you have to. The story will still be there and you will sleep better at night.

ASSERTIVENESS. This may sound odd as a journalistic value, but I think it is one of the most vital. As journalists today, we are constantly dealing with media-savvy subjects out to pursue their own agendas. I think we commit a disservice to our readers when we don't go after these folks aggressively. No comment? Why not? Is there something besides covering your own ass or the asses of others that is preventing you from talking to me and helping enlighten the public? Is there some reason you feel entitled to conduct public business in private? If so, can you explain to me what that reason might be?

I believe all these different values combine to form what I like to call journalistic character. They push against one another and strengthen you as a journalist. It is this underlying character, I believe, that gives us the courage we need to stand by our convictions - even when our reasoning might be questioned by those we respect or fear. In the end it is this journalistic character, this incredible pair of underpants, that keep you from feeling naked when your pants fall down.

Culling the Anonymous Sources

THE PUBLIC EDITOR

By *CLARK HOYT*

The New York Times

June 8, 2008

A study that I requested by students at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism suggests that The Times has made progress in its effort to set higher standards for using anonymous sources, the lifeblood and the bane of journalism. Anonymous sources have provided some of the most important information in The Times, like the disclosure of the Bush administration's extralegal bugging of international communications. But they have embarrassed the newspaper too, as with unsubstantiated suggestions that John McCain had an extramarital affair with a lobbyist.

Vital as they can be, their use is sometimes silly: a CBS producer talking about Katie Couric could not be quoted by name because management did not want anyone criticizing her. The producer said people who work with her like her.

Readers hate anonymous sources because they cannot judge the sources' credibility for themselves.

"How does a reader or a viewer know if the 'high-ranking official' ... simply has an ax to grind and may even be the janitor or imaginary?" wrote James R. Poling of Laguna Niguel, Calif., who said he discounts stories with unnamed sources because he does not trust news organizations and thinks they are biased.

Because the painful Jayson Blair scandal involved articles containing unnamed sources who apparently did not exist, The Times tightened its standards in 2004. Bill Keller, the executive editor, and Allan Siegal, then the standards editor, wrote a

policy declaring, "We resist granting sources anonymity except as a last resort to obtain information that we believe to be newsworthy and reliable."

The policy requires that at least one editor know the identity of every source.

Anonymous sources cannot be used when on-the-record sources are readily available. They must have direct knowledge of the information they are imparting; they cannot use the cloak of anonymity for personal or partisan attack; they cannot be used for trivial comment or to make an unremarkable comment seem more important than it is.

Although the purpose of the policy was not explicitly to reduce the number of anonymous sources, Keller said last week, "If you tell the editing system to be more challenging of anonymous sources, it ought to reduce the number."

Not long after I arrived as public editor last spring, I asked a class at Columbia to study The Times's use of anonymous sources to see how well the newspaper was living up to the 2004 policy.

A group of 17 students under the direction of Professor Richard C. Wald, a former president of NBC News, read every word of every article in six issues of the newspaper published before the policy and six from last fall. Here is what they found:

The number of articles relying on anonymous sources fell by roughly half after the policy was introduced.

Most anonymous sources — nearly 80 percent — were still not adequately described to readers. How did they know their information? Why did they need anonymity? But that was still better than before the policy, when nearly 90 percent were inadequately described.

The use of anonymous sources to air opinion, not fact, increased after 2004, even

though the policy would seem to discourage that.

Anonymous sources were much less likely to appear on Page 1 under the new policy, perhaps because front-page articles got more scrutiny from editors.

The use of anonymous sources declined in virtually every part of the newspaper, except the Business section, where they inexplicably shot up. Stories from Washington, where anonymity is bred into the political and government culture, accounted for roughly a third of all anonymous sources in the newspaper before the policy and declined to roughly a quarter of them afterward.

The findings suggest that The Times is policing the unnecessary use of anonymous sources better than the students or I expected — but that it still has a long way to go to help readers understand the reliability of an unnamed source and why that source cannot be identified.

“I’ve worked in newsrooms,” said one of the students, Jim Edwards, who hopes to be an investigative business journalist. “I was expecting that there would not be a very dramatic effect, and it surprised me there was.”

The study highlighted something else. It is easy to say, in the abstract, that anonymous sources are bad. But when the students started discussing them, the judgments were very difficult. Cassandra Lizaire said the students had a lot of debates over whether a particular anonymous source was necessary and even what constituted an anonymous source.

The students decided, for example, to count quotations from the Defense Ministry of Sri Lanka or a Ford spokeswoman as anonymous sources, because an individual was not named. Keller did not agree with that, and I agree with him that these clearly are official statements that an institution is standing behind.

The study highlighted something that bothers readers and that Times editors were already trying to fix: the common but uninformative explanation that a source

could not be named “because he was not authorized to discuss the matter.”

Sanjay Arwade, a reader from Amherst, Mass., wrote recently to ask if such explanations “really mean anything more than that the source did not want to be quoted by name. They seem like empty justifications to me.”

In an in-house critique to the staff in April, Phil Corbett, the deputy news editor in charge of the style manual, said that relying “on such standard formulas works directly against our goals in accounting for anonymous sourcing.” He said that if the source is afraid of getting in trouble with the boss, that is what the explanation should say. But the more important thing to tell readers, Corbett said, is how reliable the source is. The Columbia students found that The Times failed to do that quite often. Wald, Edwards and Lizaire presented the findings a week ago Friday to Keller, Jill Abramson, the managing editor for news, and Craig Whitney, the standards editor. The full study will soon be posted on the Web site of the Columbia Journalism Review. Abramson will answer readers’ questions about anonymous sources on the Web site of The Times this week.

Keller sent a memo Wednesday telling the newsroom that the Columbia study presented “an excellent opportunity to remind ourselves that unnamed sources are not to be used lightly.”

But he said it was “high-minded foolishness” to suggest that The Times or any newspaper forswear them altogether. “The ability to offer protection to a source is an essential of our craft,” he said. “We cannot bring readers the information they want and need to know without sometimes protecting sources who risk reprisals, firing, legal action or, in some parts of the world, their lives when they confide in us.”

That is why it is so critically important that anonymous sources not be used lazily or out of habit, and why, when they really are necessary, readers need to be told as much as possible about why the sources can’t be identified and how they know what they know.

Thou shalt not concoct thy quote

Supreme Court decides on the rules of the quotation game

Masson v. New Yorker Magazine reversed an earlier ruling that the quotes attributed to Jeffrey Masson by Janet Malcolm were allowable.

By Steve Weinberg

“In this libel case, a public figure claims he was defamed by an author who, with full knowledge of the inaccuracy, used quotation marks to attribute to him comments he had not made.”

—Masson v. New Yorker

If Janet Malcolm had let Jeffrey Masson read her profile of him for The New Yorker ahead of publication, a lawsuit recently sustained by the U.S. Supreme Court probably never would have progressed to its current dangerous stage.

Most journalists oppose pre-publication review (PPR, for short) on ethical and legal grounds. They won't show an entire story or even part of it to a source in manuscript form. They won't participate in telephone readbacks. They won't check direct quotations for accuracy and context. But that journalistic taboo is misguided. I have practiced PPR as a newspaper staff writer, a magazine freelancer and a book author. Never have I regretted my practice. What I do regret is failing to do it during the first decade of my career because of mindless adherence to tradition. I started using PPR occasionally while working as a project reporter on the Des Moines Register in the mid-70s. It was the first time I had the luxury of writing non-deadline stories and therefore the opportunity to check for accuracy. Many sources had feared talking to me, knowing when I called, it usually meant they'd be part of an investigative piece. But promising them the chance to check my manuscript gave them the self-assurance to talk after all.

It was nearly 10 years ago that I started making PPR my normal practice. The story that played a major role in my decision was the same one that led me to forever abandon relying on anonymous sources. Ironically, it was not an investigative piece but a fairly light feature for a leading journalism magazine.

The topic: computer-assisted reporting, something very new in 1982. My peg was a Washington correspondent for a major metropolitan daily who'd devised marvelous techniques for building computer databases that yielded interesting pieces. Some of the reporter's colleagues, however, disliked this newfangled journalism. I quoted one of the detractors, anonymously. My point: to show that anybody considering such a high-tech method might run into newsroom doubters. That anonymous quote started a witch hunt within the newsroom to identify my source. The Washington bureau chief begged me, then angrily ordered me, to reveal the name to him. I refused. The anonymous source was upset, too, because of the witchhunt and because he/she felt I'd failed to use strong enough criticism.

During the midst of this brouhaha, I attended my first journalism ethics conference and realized the stupidity of anonymous sourcing and of risking inaccuracy unnecessarily.

Journalists have lots of ethical obligations; at or near the top of the list is accuracy. And accuracy encompasses a great deal, including getting facts straight, quotations verbatim, paraphrases in proper form when eschewing exact quotes, and providing context. PPR allows reporters and editors to accomplish those goals without surrendering control over the ultimate story.

Maybe Janet Malcolm will become a convert. Her main outlet has always been *The New Yorker*, which was previously renowned for its fact-checking. But her profile of psychoanalyst Masson was checked only part way. If he'd been permitted to review his quotes, he and Malcolm might have worked out their differences. Instead, they're enmeshed in a multi-million dollar, multi-year, unnecessary libel action that could seriously erode journalists' First Amendment protections. By now, numerous journalists reading this are likely apoplectic. I've raised this topic in enough newsrooms while conducting investigative reporting workshops to know I'll get hate letters and enraged phone calls. But the prospect of the Malcolm-Masson dispute going to trial is reason enough to subject myself to the ire once more. And every time I raise the subject, I hear from journalists who practice PPR but fear coming out of the closet.

PPR has many benefits. First, it often gets me access to sources otherwise reluctant to talk because they've been misquoted or because they have a vested interest in keeping quiet, or both. My written promise of pre-publication review puts some of their fears at rest. Of course, I spell out that the review is for purposes of accuracy only and that I retain total control over whether to make alterations.

Second, PPR has occasionally caught errors of fact or interpretation, which is the point.

Third, PPR has jogged the memory of sources, who often offer me even better quotes, even more compelling evidence, than during the original interview.

The objections I hear from journalists fall into four broad categories:

Sources might deny direct quotes or other information, thus censoring the story before it appears.

My reply: If the denials ring true, it's time to reevaluate the evidence. If, on the other hand, my shorthand notes, tape recording and/or documents confirm my version, I change nothing.

Sources might place pressure on higher-ups in the news organization to kill the story before publication. This is a melodramatic objection that almost never happens and has certainly never happened to me. If it did, I'd present my evidence to my editor or whomever and if he or she failed to back me, I'd never work for them again. I'd also make sure my colleagues knew of their cowardice.

Sources might threaten to sue upon reading the manuscript. So what, I reply. Courts almost always reject pre-publication censorship. Besides, if a source is angry enough to make that threat, the same source who hasn't seen the article beforehand might sue after publication. Should that occur, many judges and juries would be impressed that the reporter offered an opportunity to check accuracy.

Pre-publication review is unprofessional. Reply: No matter how much we like to think journalists get stories correct, this is wishful thinking. Every journalist I know who's been quoted but not afforded PPR has later complained about being misquoted or taken out of context.

Using PPR might spare media the necessity of running corrections and clarifications almost daily. It is shocking that some magazines, *The New Yorker* included, some newspapers and perhaps the majority of broadcast stations afford no opportunities for setting the record straight, short of litigation.

Any journalist condemning pre-publication review reflexively — because “it just isn't done” — ought to try it at least once. In the unlikely event it backfires, then there is cause for debate.

Now a freelance writer in Missouri, Steve Weinberg was a staff writer for several newspapers and magazines and executive director of Investigative Reporters & Editors. Source: FineLine: The Newsletter On Journalism Ethics, vol. 3, no. 7 (July/August 1991), pp. 3-4.

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Society of Professional Journalists

Code of Ethics

Preamble

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. Members of the Society share a dedication to ethical behavior and adopt this code to declare the Society's principles and standards of practice.

Seek Truth and Report It

Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information. Journalists should:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
- Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.
- Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.
- Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.
- Avoid misleading re-enactments or staged news events. If re-enactment is necessary to tell a story, label it.
- Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story.
- Never plagiarize.
- Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.
- Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.
- Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.
- Support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.
- Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.
- Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.

- Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

Minimize Harm

Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.

Journalists should:

- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.
- Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.
- Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.
- Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.
- Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.
- Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.

Act Independently

Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.

Journalists should:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.
- Remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.
- Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news.

Be Accountable

Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other. Journalists should:

- Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.
- Encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media.
- Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.
- Expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media.
- Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.

Sigma Delta Chi's first Code of Ethics was borrowed from the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1926. In 1973, Sigma Delta Chi wrote its own code, which was revised in 1984 and 1987.

The present version of the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics was adopted in September 1996.

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/media/media_ethics/quiz.php

Online NewsHour

The web site of The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer

Credibility in Question

INTERACTIVE

Making the Ethical Choice

Are the ethical choices journalists must make always black or white? Test your own opinions in this interactive.

To begin, select from any of the scenarios listed below. Read each scenario and click on the statement that closest fits what you would do. Based on your choice, you'll face a new situation in which you will be asked to make your final decision. Each scenario concludes with an evaluation presenting the preferred ethical approach.

Because journalism ethics cannot be outlined in a rigid set of rules, a "correct answer" is not specified at the end of each scenario, and you will not get a final score. Instead, you can judge how close you came to the preferable course of action in the final evaluation for each scenario.

Interactive by Lisa Greeves, English and journalism teacher in Virginia



- Scenario 1: **"Off the Record"**
- Scenario 2: **Controversial Images**
- Scenario 3: **Presenting Both Sides**
- Scenario 4: **Anonymous Sources**
- Scenario 5: **Conflict of Interest**
- Scenario 6: **The Importance of Note-taking**
- Scenario 7: **Plagiarism and Attribution**
- Scenario 8: **Independence**
- Scenario 9: **Impartiality**
- Scenario 10: **Freebie Offers**

ADDITIONAL FEATURES

- MAIN: CREDIBILITY IN QUESTION
- CASE STUDIES
 - CBS News and the National Guard
 - USA Today and Jack Kelley
 - The New York Times and Jayson Blair
- INTERACTIVE: MAKING ETHICAL CHOICES
- SEEKING ETHICAL STANDARDS
- HOLDING THE MEDIA ACCOUNTABLE
- FORUM
- NEWSHOUR EXTRA
- ARCHIVE

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What are the ethics of online journalism?

The ethics of online journalism are, ultimately, no different than the ethics of journalism. The Society of Professional Journalists has articulated a comprehensive policy of journalism ethics that can help guide any conscientious online writer. That said, here are some basic qualities that any good online writer ought content ought to demonstrate:

No plagiarism

By now, you've likely discovered that writing is hard work. You certainly don't want someone else swiping your effort and presenting it as his or her own.

So don't steal others' work.

Such theft is plagiarism. It includes not just cutting and pasting whole articles, but copying photos, graphics, video and even large text excerpts from others and putting them on your Web page as well.

If you want to reference something on another Web site, link it instead.

If you are concerned that the page you're linking to will disappear, give your readers the name of the publication that published the page, its date of publication and a short summary of its content. Just like news reporters used to reference other content before the Web. ("In a Sept. 20 report, the Wall Street Journal reported....").

When in doubt, do both. There's no such thing as too much supporting information.

Disclose, disclose, disclose

Tell your readers how you got your information, and what factors influenced your decision to publish it. If you have a personal or professional connection to people or groups you're writing about, describe it. Your readers deserve to know what has influenced the way you reported or wrote a story.

Don't hide whom you work for, or where the money to support your site comes from. If your site runs advertising, label the ads as such. Let readers know if you are making money off links elsewhere on your site, as well.

No gifts or money for coverage

One common way journalists avoid conflicts of interest is by refusing gifts or money from sources they cover. Writers who accept gifts, payments or honoraria from the people or groups they cover open themselves up to charges that their work is a paid advertisement for those sources. Or, at the very least, that those writers are too "close" to these sources to cover them honestly. You can avoid controversy by politely declining such offers.

Most major news organizations do allow their writers to accept free admission to events for the purpose of writing a feature or review. But most of those organizations bar their writers from "junkets," where groups provide free travel and hotel rooms in addition to attendance at their event.

Many companies also send items such as books and DVDs to writers who review them. Items of significant value ought to be returned after the review. Less expensive items, such as books, can be donated to a local school or charity.

If you are writing about your employer, obviously you are accepting money from it. But let your readers know that. Identify yourself as an employee, even if you are writing anonymously, so people know enough about your background that they can make their own judgment about your credibility.

As writers should not accept money from sources, they also should not ask for it. If your site runs ads, do not solicit people or groups you cover to buy ads or sponsorships on your site. Find someone else handle your ad sales.

Check it out, then tell the truth

Just because someone else said it, this statement does not make it true. Reward your readers with accurate information that stands up to scrutiny from other writers. Check out your information before you print it.

Find facts, not just others' opinions, to support your comments. Start with sites such as our guide to reporting to learn how to find real data, not someone else's spin. Make sure that what you are writing isn't merely repeating some urban myth, either.

If you are writing about someone else, call or e-mail them for a comment before you publish. If your subject has a blog, link to it. That link will notify the subject that you've written about them, and will allow your readers to click-through and read the subject's side of the story.

If you want to write satire or spoofs, fine. But make sure your audience knows that what you are writing is not literal truth. Tricking readers won't help you develop the respect, credibility or loyal audience that truthful writers enjoy and rely upon.

Be honest

In summary, be honest with your readers and transparent about your work. If people wonder for a moment about your honesty or your motives, you've lost credibility with them. Don't let them do that. Answer those questions even before readers ask.

And most important is to never utilize your power of press for personal gains or simply annoying someone.

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