

Editorial Decision-making Guidelines

Student Media follows standard news industry practices in making editorial and content publishing decisions. First and foremost, decisions are guided by a code of ethics. Student Media embraces the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics (attached).

The set of guidelines that follow outline how the ethics code can be applied in day-to-day decision making and is intended to help students as they practice their craft in an educational setting.

Journalist Principles

There are a few incontrovertible principles that journalists agree upon. They are:

1. We will not lie.
2. We will not misstate our identities or intentions.
3. We will not fabricate.
4. We will not plagiarize.
5. We will not alter visual content to mislead readers and viewers.
6. We will not intentionally slant the news.

These principles are to be adhered to regardless of extenuating circumstances, and at Student Media, as at other news organizations, violations are grounds for firing by the student leadership, or, in the case of a violation by a student leader, by a majority vote of the Student Media Advisory Board.

There is a wide range of other principles, as outlined in the SPJ ethics code, that require discussion, judgment and the weighing of sometimes competing values. There are few absolutes in journalism, and no editorial statement can envision every circumstance that may be faced in the course of covering the news. Careful judgment and common sense should be applied to make decisions that best serve the interests of readers.

Minimize Harm

The SPJ ethics code states that a journalist's first priority is to "seek truth and report it," but there are other principles to consider as well. One of these is to "minimize harm," which includes the directive: "Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity." This encompasses what topics are covered, what visuals are selected and whether or not the publication chooses to publish profanity.

Obscenity, as defined by current legal standards, has no place our publications. It also, by its very nature, has no firm or strict definition. Good taste for any publication is a subjective measure that is largely determined by the standards of its audience. The primary audience of a college publication is made up of young adults who tend to be more accepting of profane language and explicit content, whether it is words or visuals.* This does not mean, however, that college media organizations should use such content unreservedly. Editors should keep in mind that the college media is consumed by

students, faculty, staff and community members who may object to such content. Additionally, vulgarity in words or visuals often overshadows the journalistic purpose. Explicit language may be necessary in reporting on health issues and, in a more limited way, for sexual crime stories. However, such content is best used only when it is important to the readers' understanding and should not overshadow the other, more important facts of the story.

In sum, potentially offensive words or visuals need not be withheld just because they might offend, but care should be taken to weigh whether the potential offensiveness of content is outweighed by the journalistic mission to inform and enlighten.

The Process

In making decisions about content, it is important that student editors follow a deliberate and careful process. A good process, while not guaranteeing a good outcome, certainly increases the likelihood that a sound decision will be made. In the case of Student Media, that process can be defined as follows:

- The reporter, producer, videographer or photographer should notify his or her immediate supervisor about potentially offensive content.
- The assigning editor should notify top student leadership, who may, in turn, seek the advice of the State Press editorial board, the Student Media Director, or the Student Media Advisory Board.
- Decision-makers should consult the SPJ ethics code and follow the ethical decision-making model offered by the Poynter Institute (attached)

- Poynter's 10 Questions to Ask Yourself

<http://www.poynter.org/2002/ask-these-10-questions-to-make-good-ethical-decisions/1750/>

- Poynter's Guiding Principles

<http://www.poynter.org/2002/guiding-principles-for-the-journalist/1751/>

- SPJ's Code of Ethics

<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

- Decision-makers should consider a diversity of views from those who might be impacted by the decision to publish or not publish.
- Decision-makers are encouraged to consult with their editorial adviser so that he or she has the opportunity to offer guidance and advice.
- The final decision is in the hands of the student leaders.
- Complaints about editorial decisions should be directed to students, who should be prepared to answer questions about their decision and listen to competing points of view. Additionally, reaction to what has been published should be invited through all methods of communication: paper, e-mail, phone, social media and open forums or open houses for readers, which can form the basis for future reporting or commentary. Letters to the editor and guest columns should reflect the range of opinions offered.

Student Media Advisory Board

Complaints about editorial decisions can also be made to the Student Media Advisory Board through the Director of Student Media or any of its members. Editors and leaders of student media organizations are protected from arbitrary suspension and removal due to student, faculty, administrative, or public disapproval of editorial policy or content. However, according to the board bylaws, a student leader may be removed by a majority vote of the board for the following reasons:

- Willful violations of professional standards as stated in the code of ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists

- Willful refusal to follow the direction of the Student Media Advisory

Board or the Director of Student Media regarding matters of libel or obscenity, as defined by current legal standards, or disruption of the University's ability to carry out its educational mission.

- Failure to produce content according to an established production schedule.

*Associated Collegiate Press

Sources: Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics; Poynter Institute for Media Studies; The Associated Collegiate Press Model Code of Ethics for College Journalists; the Gannett Newspaper Division Principles of Ethical Conduct for Newsrooms.