

You Are the Editor! – Version 2006

Situations as well as text of what actually happened

SITUATION - #1

TOPIC: With holding details of a crime

A young man has been charged with a drug-related shooting. While working on the story you become aware that his girlfriend, also in her teens, was involved, not enough to be charged with a major crime but probably enough to be charged as an accessory. The police did not give you this information and have in fact been withholding it. The captain of the detective squad is asking you not to run that particular detail, and is willing to be very cooperative with you on this story in any other regards. Do you run the detail, because you are the only media outlet that has it and it does paint the situation in a slightly different light, or do you hold on to the information and use it as a bargaining chip (maybe you'll get an ever better scoop)? If your readers expect the most accurate, honest information what is your responsibility to them in this situation?

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED: In this situation I didn't really consider a whole lot, not because I shouldn't have, just because I got caught up in the conversation. The CID (Criminal Investigation Division) Capt. and I worked out an agreement where I would not release the specifics but he would go on record stating that they were investigating a love triangle angle, instead of merely treating it as a drug crime. My readers still thought there was a different spin than originally put out there, while they did not have their investigation "tampered" with. We also made a deal that I would get updates on the story at least 24 hours before any other media outlet or I would use the girl's name. Not sure if that was entirely ethical, but it made my bosses happy.

SITUATION - #2

TOPIC: Covering a funeral

A state representative from the next town over (still in your coverage area) has been accused of improper behavior with a child while on vacation in Florida. Two days into coverage of the story the man kills himself. The funeral will be attended by political dignitaries on every level and the investigation into the misdeeds has not been halted. The funeral home has asked the media to respect the family's privacy, flat out refusing any recording devices, including still and video cameras, on the property of the church where the funeral will be held. This in no small part because the family blames the media attention for the man's death. What is your ethical as well as journalistic responsibility, and are they different?

WHAT HAPPENED: The funeral was on a Sunday, and I was the only reporter working that day. My bosses made it very clear that I **WOULD** be covering the funeral, much to my chagrin. I hated invading the family's space, and didn't entirely disagree with them that our collective coverage had been a factor in the man deciding to kill himself. But I went, because it was an assignment. The photographer, along with the photographers and videographers from the other newspapers and TV stations, took pictures of everyone (from the alley) as they entered the church. I and the rest of the reporters slipped in to the church at the last minute and tried to remain

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unobtrusive. The sanctuary was packed, as was the church's gymnasium which had been wired for closed-circuit broadcast of the funeral. I crouched in the very back, as there were no more seats. I furtively scribbled notes from the eulogy, as well as a description of who was there. The bosses loved it, I felt like scum. Worst assignment ever. This is where ethics, humanity and journalistic obligation collide.

SITUATION - #3

TOPIC: Covering stories where reporter has an interest

A large area outside a city is in danger of being annexed to that city including a newspaper reporter's home. The reporter has strong feelings about staying unincorporated as do many other residents in the area. The citizens have organized a neighborhood meeting to protest the annexation. A large crowd is expected with controversy expected. Question: Should the reporter write the story or ask another reporter to do it?

WHAT HAPPENED: When this actually happened, the editors had another reporter write the story while I shot photos.

SITUATION - #5

TOPIC: Membership in, and news coverage of, the same organization

SITUATION: You are the only reporter and editor at a weekly newspaper. Your job depends on having a good solid advertising base (ads, after all, do pay bills and salaries). The local Chamber of Commerce invites the editor to serve on its governing board (the publisher and owner lives and works almost 60 miles away) and also asks for help in publicizing Chamber events. The owner wants you to serve in order to help the Chamber and encourage existing business owners. He is also afraid that saying “no” will alienate advertisers. What should the reporter do?

WHAT HAPPENED: The editor served on the Chamber Board for three years as the “program chair” for the monthly meetings. Guest lunch speakers were topical and often lead to information news articles that were well received by readers and advertisers alike. The editor also covered Chamber events and fortunately, no conflicts ever came up. This was one of the situations where if you had a larger staff, a different choice could have been made. What would the SPJ Code of Ethics have to say about this situation?

SITUATION - #6

TOPIC: Reporting names of people arrested for crimes

A local school teacher is arrested by the police department on suspicion of molesting students. While the police department makes the person's name and mug shot available, the prosecutor's office has not filed charges. Do you report the story? Do you report the story and give the name of the school where the teacher works? The teacher's name? The teacher's mugshot?

WHAT HAPPENED: The TV station did report this story. It gave the name of the school where the teacher worked and showed video of the school building. It did not give the teacher's position, name or picture. Those will be withheld until the teacher is formally charged by the prosecutor.

SITUATION - #7

TOPIC: Paying for interviews

A TV station learns from the prosecutor's office that a local foster care child is near death in the hospital. The foster care mother is charged with child abuse in the case. The reporter working on the story learns the name of the foster care child's biological mother. The reporter contacts the mother and asks for an interview. The mom is willing to talk, but wants the reporter to guarantee that in turn the television station will provide money for her and her boyfriend to travel out of town to visit their daughter at the hospital. What does the reporter do?

WHAT HAPPENED: The reporter told the mother she could not guarantee her a ride out of town. She could interview the mom and tell people what they could do if they wanted to help the family out. The mother did not like that idea and found another way to the hospital and the reporter did not get the interview with the mother at that time.