

“YOU Are The Editor!”

*A program conducted jointly by
University of Missouri Extension and
Southwest Region News Service*

PURPOSE/GOAL OF PROGRAM: Short case studies, and the results of an online survey, will be used to teach journalists and the general public about the different decisions newspaper editors need to make and how those decisions impact the publication and the community.

REAL-LIFE: All case studies are based on actual events at newspapers in southwest Missouri. The options of what to do are based on what was actually done as well as at least one other option. The list of options is not exhaustive because the point of this project is to make choices, not for every participant to give individualized input. The online survey does contain the option for input on each case study and these comments will be retained as part of the research project.

INPUT: Numbers for the “editor’s choice” were gathered via an online survey with input from members of the Missouri Press Association, Society of Professional Journalists, International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors and the Community Journalism Listserv. Input and votes for the “readers” responses were originally gathered with an online survey done in partnership with Community Publishers Inc. These numbers are added to when the case studies are discussed at other programs and from responses to the case studies online at <http://extension.missouri.edu/swregion/news>.

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CASE 1: FUNERAL & PHOTOS

The local elected official, who was also a well-known business owner, dies in a tragic car accident. A reporter and photographer are assigned to cover the funeral. The photographer returns with several pictures, including one taken near the grave with the widow crying and being embraced by her children. Do you:

- A. Publish the photo of the mother and her children, because it is the most compelling.
- B. Choose a more routine photo showing pallbearers carrying the casket.
- C. Run just a file mug shot of the deceased with a news article.

CASE 2: JUVENILE VANDALS

Tombstones in a rural cemetery have been vandalized. A reward fund is set up and community members want stiff punishment. Police question suspects but there is not enough evidence to determine which of the suspected teenagers broke the tombstones. Police issue a charge of property damage against one teenager seen driving near the cemetery the evening of the vandalism. The newspaper should:

- A. Name the accused juvenile.
- B. Do not name the accused, but report a person has been charged.

CASE 3: CAUSE OF DEATH

Your newspaper has a tradition of writing news articles about any well-known community leader who dies. Typically, those articles mention the cause of death. A 45-year old man who has been a prominent educator dies but relatives refuse to discuss the cause of death. Your reporter is able to confirm the cause of death was an AIDS-related illness. Do you:

- A. Go against wishes of the family and print that AIDS was the cause of death.
- B. List the cause as complications of pneumonia, without reference to AIDS.

CASE 4: LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

You receive an unsigned “letter to the editor” that details serious fraud in the local city budget. Your newspaper has a policy of not printing unsigned letters but the writer of this one says they will be fired from their job with the city if their name is printed. Do you:

- A. Print the letter unsigned because the content is so precise and important.
- B. Not print the letter but pursue the issues outlined in the letter as a news story.
- C. Assume the content is a hoax and throw the letter in the trash.

CASE 5: IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS

Your local school district is accepting bids for the construction of a new school. One community member comes to you with documents showing the contractor and board president are working together to make sure a friend wins the bid. However, your source for the documents wants to remain anonymous and no outside source can confirm that the memos, or signatures on them, are authentic. Do you:

- A. Run with the story, quoting extensively from the unauthenticated memos, and giving the contractor and board president a chance to respond.
- B. Hold the story until the documents can be proven as authentic even if that is long after the contract has been awarded and construction has started.

CASE 6: THREATENING LETTERS

You are working on a story showing the local sewer district has violated federal environmental laws and given kickbacks to contractors. While working on the story you receive two ominously mailed letters (created from cut out letters pasted on copy paper) threatening your spouse with bodily harm if you continue researching the story. As editor do you:

- A. Call the FBI to investigate but make no other changes in your coverage.
- B. Write a story detailing the content of the letters and threats received by the editor.
- C. Ignore the letters and pursue the sewer system story without reference to them.
- D. For the safety of your reporter, drop the story and go to the police.

CASE 7: ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

Your town is booming because of an influx of Hispanics that have arrived and found employment. Your advertisers are doing more business, running more ads, and you are selling more subscriptions. Still not everyone in town is happy about the new residents, many of whom are here illegally. Do you:

- A. Regularly pursue stories about immigration issues, focusing specifically on finding illegal immigrants in your community.
- B. Only report on illegal immigrants when someone is arrested; otherwise, focus reporting on opportunities for local residents to gain a better understanding of their new neighbors.
- C. Do both, Pursue stories on immigration because it impacts your community and also pay special attention to local events that bring people from different backgrounds together.

CASE 8: CHANGING A PHOTO

You assign staff to write a feature article about a community leader who has completed a porn-addiction recovery program and publicly said his life has been changed. One photo taken in his office reveals two copies of Playboy Magazine partially hidden in a bookcase behind him. Do you:

- A. Crop the magazines out of the picture.
- B. Publish the picture intact and let readers come to their own conclusions.

CASE 9: MAKING UP QUOTES

One of your reporters writes stories for use in a special newspaper section. A copy editor happens to talk with a story source and discovers quotes in a story by this reporter are made up. The quotes are pulled before being printed and the reporter is reprimanded but retained. As editor you should:

- A. Write a column admitting the problem and explaining to readers that the error was caught and the quotes were not published.
- B. Since the quote was never printed, this is strictly an internal issue and there is no need to let the reading public know this event ever occurred.

CASE 10: SHUTDOWN RUMOR

A small community medical facility has been the topic of a rumor for several weeks saying they plan to close. Your reporter checks it out but comes up with nothing. Although baseless, the rumor persists. Do you:

- A. Ask that a story be written reporting it is a rumor and that no basis in fact can be found.
- B. Print no story.

CASE 11: ILLEGALLY DOCUMENTS

Your reporter has been working on a story about a major government scandal. So far, the reporter

has several anonymous sources but lacks supporting documents. This is mainly because documents relevant to your story have been sealed. One day, the reporter is given a copy of the papers which have been removed illegally from the files. Do you:

- A. Publish a story even though the papers were obtained illegally.
- B. Not publish because the files were taken illegally but continue to pursue the story in other ways.

CASE 12: CROSS BURNING

A young African-American couple, new to your community, wake up one night and find a cross burning in their front yard. The police investigate but the family persuades police investigators not to release their name and address. They do this because they don't want others to know where they live. One of your reporters manages to come up with the couple's names and address. Do you:

- A. Identify the couple and give their street address, keeping in mind other residents in the neighborhood may want or need to know so they can protect themselves.
- B. Be sensitive to the couple's fears and withhold their identification and address.

CASE 13: JOURNALISTS SPEAKING OUT

The crime and government reporter for your newspaper speaks at a regular meeting of the Young Democrats on his day off. During his talk he says the Democratic candidate for Sheriff would do a better job and gives an example of something the current Sheriff has done that he thinks is wrong. Do you:

- A. Take the reporter off of the crime and government beat because he has proven he cannot be unbiased in reporting about the Sheriff.

- B. Let the reporter continue his job of objective news reporting; the opinions he shares during his time off has no impact on his ability to do his job.

CASE 14: ADVANCE READ OF LETTER

You receive a signed “letter to the editor” that is very critical of the local school Superintendent. You know when the letter is published it will cause a rumble in the community. You also know that the letter won’t be published for another six days. Do you:

- A. In advance of publication, show the letter to the Superintendent so he can have time to draft a response that can be printed at the same time.
- B. Print the letter and let others, including the Superintendent, respond in a letter on the issues being outlined in the complaint.

CASE 15: RACIST ADVERTISEMENT

A local “colorful character,” who has repeatedly had his “letters to the editor” rejected by your newspaper, arrives at your newspaper office just before deadline with a display ad and cash. The ad, a series of racist jokes, is placed while you are out of the office. It ends up running, resulting in a community outcry. As editor you:

- A. Write and publish a column and explain the newspaper’s publication policies and the importance of freedom of speech.
- B. Follow the advertisement with a series of articles on racial tensions in the community as well as a public forum about overcoming racism sponsored by the newspaper.
- C. Ask the publisher to write an advertisement policy. Otherwise, stay out of the process (except for the publication of the letters-to-the-editor that came following in afterward).

CASE 16: CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The wife of your business reporter runs a home childcare center out of her home. One of the children, who come to her childcare, is the son of the local Chamber of Commerce executive director, a frequent source for your crime reporter. As editor you:

- A. Ask the crime reporter to move to another beat or have his wife no longer keep that child.
- B. Make no mention of it since this is a choice made by the reporter’s wife.

CASE 17: ELECTION COVERAGE

Your reporter has a story that could blow the top off the county commissioner’s race. However, he has only one questionable source and you have only one issue of your newspaper left before the election. As editor you:

- A. Go ahead and print the story because of its importance and your belief that voters need all of the possible information about candidates before they vote.
- B. Hold the story beyond the election until you can get additional sources, even though voters may be angry to find out about this issue after the election.

CASE 18: PUBLIC NOTICE

Your local tax-supported fire district board frequently has special, unannounced meetings without posting any sort of public notice. You believe these surprise meetings violate the Sunshine Law. As editor you:

- A. File a complaint with the Missouri Attorney General’s office about the possible violation of the Sunshine Laws, and then report on that complaint.
- B. Meet with the board (before writing a story) and inform them about the finer points of the Sunshine Law and how to comply with the law.

CASE 19: PLAGIARISM

One of your general reporters volunteers to write a book review for publication. Book reviews are a regular feature of your paper. You agree to let the reporter submit a review and you print it. Then you find out the following week that the review that reporter submitted is copied from another online source. As editor you:

- A. Fire the reporter for plagiarism.
- B. The reporter promises that this is the first time she has ever done anything like this so you agree to let her keep her job with a promise that she won't do it again.

CASE 20: DWI TICKETS

Your newspaper has a policy of aggressively covering DWI tickets and arrests, especially when they involve elected or public officials. Your ace reporter, the one who often covers DWI arrests, is pulled over following a July 4th party and ticketed for DWI. As editor you:

- A. Write a story and treat your reporter's arrest with the same aggressive reporting that you do for DWI tickets and arrests of public officials.
- B. Treat the reporter's DWI ticket as only an internal issue because your reporter is not a public official. No story on the reporter's ticket should be published.

CASE 21: REPORTER ON BOARD

Your newspaper has a business reporter who is well-respected in the community. This year, he begins a 5-year term on the local Chamber of Commerce Board and in three years he will be the Chamber president. In past years, he has covered all Chamber of Commerce events and programs for the newspaper. As editor you:

- A. Ask this reporter not to cover any Chamber events or news while serving on the board and assign another reporter to do so.

- B. Ask the reporter not to serve on the Chamber board in order to prevent the appearance of conflict.

CASE 22: BALANCED COVERAGE

Your newspaper receives a story from an EPA news brief stating that the air in America during 2003 was found to be the cleanest in 30 years of monitoring. That same day, your newspaper gets a media release from a Democratic candidate accusing the current Republican controlled government of trying to gut the Clear Air Act and making the air dirtier. As editor you:

- A. Run with both stories, side by side.
- B. Only run the story with the Democratic candidate because as an expert on environmental issues, you know the air is dirtier and the EPA is lying.

CASE 23: PHOTO OF CRIME

At a campaign rally, your photographer takes a photo of two people taking down a flag and a candidate's banner. Turns out, it was a crime in action and your photographer now has the best evidence for helping police solve the crime. The police are now demanding an immediate copy of the photo since your photographer was witness to a crime. As editor you:

- A. Turn the photo over to police.
- B. Tell police they can wait for three days until the photo is published.

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