

Total surveys received to date
328 Editors * 386 Readers

CASE 1: FUNERAL COVERAGE & PHOTOS

Choice picked in real life: A

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	59%	A	29%
B	25%	B	37%
C	16%	C	33%

Comments:

- Editor*—“If the family doesn't want this type of photo to be taken they should ask the press not to attend the funeral.”
- Editor*—“If all you are going to do is run a file mug shot, don't bother.”
- Editor*—“I would run another compelling photograph that is not as intrusive.”
- Editor*—“Notify the family first if you are going to go and cover the actual funeral. These are private events, not public affairs like a pep rally.”
- Editor*—“The funeral is large because of the circumstance, which produces emotion. You have to show emotion in the photo in order to depict the event. Otherwise, don't run a photo at all.”
- Reader*—“A funeral is a family event, not an opportunity for the media to take pictures and sell more papers.”

CASE 2: JUVENILE VANDALS

Choice picked in real life: B

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	17%	A	22%
B	83%	B	78%

Comments:

- Editor*—“Our policy is to not name juveniles under any circumstance.”
- Editor*—“If the child is under 17, the name can't be used. That is the law in most states.”
- Editor*—“Based on the fact that charges are filed, I would run the name. I'm assuming the person will be charged as an adult.”
- Editor*—“Try to get the teen to go on the record and discuss the incident. It would be a great story and that way you can use the name too. Normally, just a phone call to the person arrested can get this done.”
- Reader*—“Cut the kid some slack, especially since the facts are circumstantial. We all make mistakes.”

CASE 3: CAUSE OF DEATH

Choice picked in real life: A

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	39%	A	35%
B	61%	B	65%

Comments:

- Editor*—“I would be inclined to honor the family's wishes since this is not information readers need to know.”
- Editor*—“We need to help society move past the notion that AIDs is a shameful disease.”
- Editor*—“Does the public need to know this? Unless there is a compelling reason, I don't see the relevance.”
- Editor*—“We've had so many problems with this that we have stopped even inquiring about the cause of death.”
- Editor*—“Decision is based on information that individual had a close working relationship with students. That makes this information part of a news story.”
- Editor*—“Our obits are paid now so the cause of death used is what ever the family sends. We tend to go more in-depth when a news story is merited but I'm not sure AIDs is that big of a deal anymore.”

CASE 4: LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Choice picked in real life: A

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	4%	A	7%
B	95%	B	88%
C	1%	C	5%

Comments:

- Editor*—“We don't print unsigned letters although we will on occasion not use a name, but we have to be able to speak to the writer. In this case, if the information was really important then the charges should be investigated for a news story.”
- Editor*—“We don't give credence to anything anonymous. It is a matter of credibility, ours and the authors.”
- Editor*—“Do every thing you can to get the letter writer to let you print their name. Otherwise, don't print it.”
- Editor*—“In this case, the letter is used simply as a tip and must be corroborated and investigated for a story.”
- Editor*—“My experience has been that unsigned letters are often 75 percent correct, but rarely ever 100 percent correct. I've chased more stories from letters that have gone nowhere than ones that have led to a story. Don't waste your time with these, just throw them away.”

CASE 5: IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS

Choice picked in real life: A

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	19%	A	28%
B	81%	B	72%

Comments:

Editor—“Smells like CBS. You need good proof and the newspaper has an obligation to investigate thoroughly.”

Editor—“Decision would be made based on the seriousness of the charges and an evaluation of their accuracy made after some research and investigation. There is always another source.”

Editor—“We work hard to convince sources that we need their names. Most of the time this can be accomplished.”

Editor—“There is always another source.”

Editor—“Without proof that the charges are true, it's wrong to run with such a story that damages people's reputations, but the paper has an obligation to investigate this thoroughly and even to put questions to the two officials about the charges..”

CASE 6: THREATENING LETTERS

Choice picked in real life: B

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	71%	A	83%
B	27%	B	5%
C	3%	C	1%
D	0%	D	11%

Comments:

Editor—“I've had something similar to this happen. There may not be a perfect answer to fit every situation; some of how you might deal with this depends on the reporter.”

Editor—“Call the police, report the story and make sure your reporter is safe until the facts are known.”

Editor—“Anything that involves the U.S. mail becomes an issue for the FBI, but I would continue to follow the sewer story as well as follow the investigation into the letters.”

Editor—“Lots of times folks who send these letters just want the attention. Don't give it to them.”

CASE 7: ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

Choice picked in real life: B

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	5%	A	21%
B	38%	B	26%
C	57%	C	53%

Comments:

Editor—“Do both but don't make the issue of illegal immigrants a regular topic.”

Editor—“This is a no-brainer isn't it? Should be doing both. Make sure stories on illegal immigrants are done. It would be easy to just leave them out.”

CASE 8: CAUGHT IN A PHOTO

Choice picked in real life: A

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	12%	A	19%
B	88%	B	81%

Comments:

Editor—“Confront the fellow at the time the picture is taken. I can't believe getting rid of the photo, doctoring it or cropping it would even be a consideration.”

Editor—“Use a different photo. I have lots of things on my shelves given to me as gifts that I have no intention of reading or using.”

Editor—“I'd call and ask the person interviewed.”

Editor—“I'd take another photo after pointing out the magazines to the leader. It might be an honest mistake.”

CASE 9: MAKING UP QUOTES

Choice picked in real life: B

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	24%	A	24%
B	76%	B	76%

Comments:

Editor—“Whether to retain or fire the reporter is the bigger issue. Of course the newspaper should admit to the problem. Reporters past stories should be reviewed.”

Editor—“We expect the government to be truthful, we should be ourselves”

Editor—“This information will eventually get out into the community, we might as well admit to it when it happens.”

Editor—“I'd fire the reporter. Period”

Editor—“I don't apologize for mistakes handled in-house and not published. We do correct the published ones.”

Editor—“Were the quotes just paraphrased or made up? That would make a difference.”

Editor—“Sounds like the editing system worked. The real question is what to do with the reporter.”

Editor—“It depends on the nature of the made-up quotes. If we are talking about making up quotes regarding breaking news that is different than making up a fluffy feature quote.”

CASE 10: SHUTDOWN RUMOR

Choice picked in real life: A

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	57%	A	34%
B	43%	B	66%

Comments:

Editor—“If it is really rampant, the newspaper does a service by exposing it.”

Editor—“At some point, the strength of rumors becomes news itself.”

Editor—“I learned this lesson the hard way. Follow up on rumors because what is a rumor today may be fact one year from now and if you knew about it, and didn't pursue it, your credibility is destroyed.”

Editor—“I think it depends on how pervasive the rumor is. Sometimes a story like this is required.”

Editor—“Facts is facts, why spread gossip?”

Editor—“Don't report rumors. There are enough facts out there to keep us occupied.”

CASE 11: ILLEGAL DOCUMENTS

Choice picked in real life: A

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	46%	A	24%
B	54%	B	76%

Comments:

Editor—“A lot of things are classified that shouldn't be; the test should be whether the information is something the public needs to make decisions or just gossip. If it is the later, no story. If it is the former, we should be doing our jobs.”

Editor—“Does the term Watergate mean anything here? The end does not justify the means.”

Editor—“Tough one. This depends on whether this was an isolated incident or there have been other incidents. I may hold the name now but watch for other incidents.”

Editor—“If it is of the same level of the Pentagon papers, I would publish, if it is a minor scandal, probably not.”

Editor—“Use the documents as leads for other sources of information.”

CASE 12: CROSS BURNING

Choice picked in real life: B

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	19%	A	5 %
B	81%	B	95 %

Editor—“I'd just run this as a police report item, not as a full story. In the pursuit of truth we must remember to do no harm.”

Editor—“I'd be inclined to be sensitive here but also would talk with the couple and see if they would be willing to go on the record.”

Editor—“Follow police department's lead on this one.”

Editor—“This incident deserves an editorial too. Talk to the couple. This would be a great chance for some public education and involvement on this issue.”

Editor—“Unless the names came from the police, I would not use the names on this one.”

CASE 13: JOURNALISTS SPEAKING OUT

Choice picked in real life: B

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	68%	A	54%
B	32%	B	46%

Comments:

Editor—“Reporter should have cleared this event with his editor ahead of time. The perception would be reporter can't be impartial on stories involving the Sheriff.”

Editor—“I don't see what the big deal is. All reporters have personal opinions.”

Editor—“Reports have to be unbiased in their coverage! If the reporter made it clear it was his/her personal opinion and not necessarily the newspapers, then the reporter would not be fired.”

CASE 14: ADVANCE READING OF LETTER

Choice picked in real life: A

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	19%	A	25%
B	81%	B	75%

Comments:

Editor—“Why would a Superintendent receive any special treatment on this?” The criticism might even be worth a news story but there is no need to tell the Superintendent about the letter.”

Editor—“We have done this before and run the two letters in a point/counterpoint format. We also inform the original letter writer of our intent.”

Editor—“I've done it both ways, but I think A is fairest.”

Editor—“We have done this before, and run the two letters in a point/counterpoint format. We also inform the original letter writer of our intent.”

CASE 15: RACIST ADVERTISEMENT

Choice picked in real life: B

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	36%	A	31%
B	30%	B	35%
C	34%	C	33%

Comments:

Editor—“A racist ad shouldn't run under any circumstance and if somehow it did, you owe the community an apology.”

Editor—“Do all three, write a column, ask for a policy and try to make it up to your readers with other stories.”

Editor—“There is more at play here. Where was the ad placed, for example, could make a difference. Cash may be an issue too.”

Editor—“I would also ask the publisher to write a column explaining how this happened and what steps are being taken to ensure it doesn't ever happen again.”

Editor—“I would apologize for the ad and explain that while readers have a right to their opinions, the newspaper has the right to accept or reject any and all copy, paid or not. There is no way I would let someone hide behind the 1st Amendment on this one.”

Editor—“No way this would of happened. Someone at the newspaper should of rejected the ad copy.”

Editor—“I would not work for a newspaper that would run this type of ad. If it did, I would demand a written apology from the sales manager to be printed.”

Editor—“You need a good policy and some employees with common sense.”

Editor—“We would probably write an article on what happened and may incorporate information about racial tension and how to overcome it, but I don't think we would do a series of articles or host a public forum.”

CASE 16: CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Choice picked in real life: B

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	24%	A	22%
B	76%	B	78%

Comments:

Editor—“Switch the reporter, don't make them choose.”

Editor—“I don't think there is a conflict of interest here. Besides, I can't imagine this would happen.”

Editor—“In smaller towns, these incidents are impossible to eliminate.”

Editor—“I think the Chamber executive director has more of a problem with this than the reporter.”

CASE 17: ELECTION COVERAGE

Choice picked in real life: A

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	12%	A	22%
B	88%	B	78%

Comments:

Editor—“Questionable sources mean you don't run the story. Our newspaper's policy is to not run any type of article with accusations immediately before an election unless there is time to do a balanced job. Our job as journalists is to report things accurately and fairly.”

Editor—“It is hard to un-ring a bell.”

Editor—“The key here is a 'questionable source.' If it was a quality source, I'd run with the story.”

Editor—“Questionable sources means don't run story.”

Editor—“Hard to make this decision without specifics, but I would tend to give voters information they need, explaining the source etc.”

CASE 18: PUBLIC NOTICE OF MEETINGS

Choice picked in real life: A

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	28%	A	18%
B	72%	B	82%

Comments:

Editor—“Do both and also editorialize. People have a right to know about these meetings.”

Editor—“You don't always have to take the rough way. Sometimes genuinely good people just don't know.”

Editor—“As a weekly editor, I always try to educate first and then embarrass later.”

Editor—“There is no excuse for public bodies to violate public meeting or public record laws. I would recommend Zero tolerance.”

Editor—“We doth both. Inform them and if we hear that they still do it, file with the attorney general. This actually happened to my father and he successfully sued the fire board. We also have had city councils forced to reveal minutes of closed sessions which were held improperly.”

Editor—“If the newspaper doesn't pursue issues like this, who will?”

Editor—“In smaller communities this is a big issue and I can tell you from experience, closed meetings are not held out of ignorance of the law. They are held because board members want to hide something. I see more of this with school boards and superintendents who want to control boards and get the decisions they want.”

CASE 19: PLAGARISUM

Choice picked in real life: B

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	59%	A	87%
B	41%	B	13%

Comments:

Editor—“It’s unfortunate that we even have to debate this one. The answer is obvious.”

Editor—“There is no room for this in journalism. The reporter would be gone!”

Editor—“We discuss this with our staff and have a policy in place. One strike and you are out.”

Editor—“Many situations deserve a second chance.”

Editor—“This seems to be happening a lot more. Some of the blame belongs with publishers who are demanding more out of reporters but hiring less staff. That makes a simple cut and paste just too tempting.”

Editor—“Depends on the individual, but this will always be worrisome after the first occurrence.”

CASE 20: DWI

Choice picked in real life: B

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	45%	A	81%
B	55%	B	19%

Comments:

Editor—“This is probably not the first time this has happened, just the first time the reporter has been caught. The editor would be doing the reporter a favor by writing a story on the DWI.”

Editor—“This has happened to me and since it was in my county, it was news.”

Editor—“The name would appear in the police report, like all other tickets, but there is no need to do a full-fledged story. We all make mistakes and there is no need to hold reporters to the same standard as elected officials.”

CASE 21: EDITOR ON CHAMBER BOARD

Choice picked in real life: A

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	74%	A	88%
B	26%	B	12%

Comments:

Editor—“This would probably only happen in a small town, and sometimes there are not other reporters to give the assignment to.”

Editor—“I served as Chamber president, but was the only reporter at our weekly then and I don’t think it caused any problems.”

Editor—“Yikes! An editor should not be taking on a public role and position like this unless they want to find another profession.”

Editor—“I served on the chamber board for years and did stories because I didn’t have any other writing staff. It is a fine line to walk though, especially when something controversial happens.”

Editor—“I was asked to serve on our Chamber board and said no because of this type of thing. Others need to serve so I can attend meetings as a reporter.”

CASE 22: BALANCED COVERAGE

Choice picked in real life: B

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	73%	A	92%
B	27%	B	8%

Comments:

Editor—“The air is getting worse and from experience I know you can’t trust the EPA to always be telling the truth. As an editor, I am a truth gatekeeper.”

Editor—“Combine both stories into one.”

Editor—“I probably wouldn’t do either one unless there was a power plant in our community. I try to keep everything in our newspapers very local.”

CASE 23: CRIME PHOTO

Choice picked in real life: B

Editor's Choice		Readers Choice	
A	52%	A	80%
B	48%	B	20%

Comments:

Editor—“The police will get a copy of the photo either way and I can’t see how waiting for publication will hurt. Otherwise, the photo is much like a reporter’s notes, the police shouldn’t be able to get them.”

Editor—“Best course of action would probably be to immediately post the picture to the website.”

Editor—“Reporters and editors are citizens too, first and maybe even foremost.”

Editor—“Turn the photo over and publish it, then accept the award from the state press association the following year.”

GENERAL COMMENTS

Editor—“You pose some strong insights and food for thought with this survey. I’m not a big fan of surveys. Things in the real world of journalism aren’t always this black and white.”

Editor—“Loved the survey. This was a fun way to get the ethical juices flowing. I would love to see the results.”

Editor—“A few of these hit a little close to home. Frankly, one of them involved me and after seeing it in print it looks different on paper than when I tried to rationalize my decision at the time.”

Editor—“This was great and it got me to thinking about the issues I’d not thought about in a while.”

Editor—“These case studies were great. All newspapers should participate in such an exercise.”

Editor—“I just participated in your poll of case studies. Is it possible to get results of your poll, and to find out how each case study was actually handled? It was an excellent exercise. I’m in the process of writing a book, “Bad News and Good Judgment: A Guide to Reporting on Sensitive Issues in Small-town Newspapers,” which is scheduled to be published early next year by Marion Street Press Inc. in Chicago. I’m always looking for examples of how other newspapers/editors handle the reporting of sensitive topics, and your poll results would be most interesting.”

Editor—“Too many of the options given are ‘black and white’ and we all know the world of journalism is filled with grey.”

Editor—“The person who wrote these case studies should be fired. I thought this whole thing was poorly done and poorly executed Plus, most of these cases are just ridiculous and wouldn’t ever happen.”

Editor—“We all need the exercise of thinking about these types of decisions from time to time.”

Editor—“Many of these cases needed more facts in order to help me make a decision.”

Editor—“Most of these cases dealt with news management concerns, not journalism ethics.”

Editor—“As an industry, those of us in journalism need to talk about these types of issues more often.”

General Observations on Survey:

By David L. Burton

The latest Pew Research Center survey found that overall public attitudes toward the news media have remained fairly constant over the last several years. Americans are highly critical of the press on a number of issues, faulting it for inaccuracy, arrogance and political bias.

That same survey found that 56% of Americans say media stories and reporters are often inaccurate and 62% says the press generally tries to cover up its mistakes rather than admitting them. Given those attitudes, it is probably not surprising that a majority of Americans (58%) believe reporters at all news organizations either frequently (22%) or occasionally (36%) make up news stories.

What I find most interesting about this survey is the vast diversity of answers among editors, even on topics that deal with issues that some editors consider to be “cut and dried.” Some of the differences may exist between daily and non-daily newspapers but it is hard to tell.

Readers care passionately about the way newspapers keep them informed. Generally, readers want editors to avoid sensational headlines and show respect for individual privacy in assessing and reporting the news. In many cases, readers and editors were on the same wavelength.

“YOU Are The Editor!”

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

PURPOSE OF PROGRAM: Short case studies will be used to teach about the different decisions newspaper editors need to make and how those decisions impact the publication and the community. **For more information, contact David Burton at (417) 862-9284 or via e-mail at burtond@missouri.edu.**

