

## **Online Ethics Guidelines for Student Media**

As student media staffs explore the possibilities of digital media for gathering information and telling stories, they encounter questions of ethics both new and familiar.

As a general rule, reporters should follow the same ethical principles online as they do in print. For example, identify yourself as a reporter. Don't lurk in social media and take information without telling the author of that information who you are, verifying the source and confirming with someone else what you learned.

These online ethics guidelines will focus on situations student newspapers, yearbooks, literary magazines, news shows and other traditional storytelling forms haven't experienced much, if at all.

This document holds as a fundamental belief this statement, from a policy written in 2006 by a group of professional journalists: "Online publishing has the opportunity to serve audiences in new and meaningful ways. Journalists have an important responsibility to explore that potential as part of their constitutionally protected responsibilities to hold the powerful accountable and to serve as a public watchdog." <sup>1</sup> Student journalists reporting on any platform must continue to honor the values of truth-telling, transparency, accountability, accuracy, fairness and minimizing harm. Applying those values to interactions with readers and sources in social media, through email, online comments and 24-7-365 digital journalism raises new questions, which these guidelines hope to address.

"In its highest form, journalism is the dissemination of accurate information and provocative commentary that puts service to the reader and the common good above any special interest or economic, political or philosophical agenda," the professional journalists wrote. "What other form would be so worthy of such First Amendment protection?"

What follows is a series of ethics guidelines for student media newsrooms as they use digital and online media to cover their schools and communities. They aren't rules, but guidelines, adapted from a set of professional guidelines developed in 2009.<sup>2</sup> They won't apply to all staffs in every situation.

Student media staffs might use these as models for their own guidelines. Students should share these guidelines in advisory discussions with all stakeholders (their adviser, their administrators and school boards and members of their communities) so all parties better understand the critical thinking, ethical and journalistic issues students experience as they make decisions.

## **SECTION 1: A newsroom guideline for using social networks: As a reporting tool**

Social networks are ubiquitous enough that journalists who insist on avoiding them are likely to miss good opportunities and great stories. To that end, news organizations -- including school media -- should encourage responsible use of such networks to form connections, find story ideas and locate sources.

- **Making connections is good.** And journalists should ensure they are using a full array of tools for gathering information, including face-to-face interviews and reporting in person, out in the community.
- **Journalists must compensate for the skew of online reporting.** Not everyone has an account on Facebook or other social media. Journalists should constantly strive for diverse representations in their stories.
- **Information gathered online should be independently confirmed offline.** Interview sources in person or over the phone whenever possible. Verify claims and statements that are crowd-sourced or obtained in any way online.
- **Ensure informed consent.** It's easy for sources to misunderstand your intentions. It is your responsibility to tell them who you are, what you are doing and where your work will appear.
- **Take special consideration with young people in vulnerable situations.** When contacting anyone (including teens) in a situation that makes them vulnerable -- such as drug or alcohol use, teen pregnancy or other sensitive issues -- make sure they connect you with a responsible adult. A teen might not think through the consequences of reporting what he or she tells you, so with the goal of minimizing harm, a reporter should be sure a responsible adult knows the teen is a part of a story that is going to be published. Additionally, refer to JEA's Scholastic Press Rights Commission position on getting [consent](#).
- **Be transparent with the audience as well as sources.** Let them know how you contacted people, in what context you gathered the information and how you verified it (or didn't).
- **Consistently and clearly label information.** Clearly label verified

- information you know to be true and label opinion as such.
- **Credibility is paramount.** Maintain an independence from your school, advertisers and sources so objectivity and credibility will not be compromised.
  - **Provide context and perspective.** Be sure there is adequate context and perspective for information so the audience receives a complete story.

## **Section 2: A newsroom guideline for using social networks: To promote work**

It is important and valuable to promote work through social networks. Individual staffers bear most of this burden. But the newsroom as an institution is responsible for some of this work.

When promoting work:

- **Be accurate.** It's easy to sensationalize or oversimplify.
- **Be clear.** If you are not good at writing short, succinct copy, seek help or training.
- **Always include a link** and make sure the link works.
- **Editors are responsible.** For ongoing issues or stories, student editors are responsible for crafting a quick strategy for promoting and branding work.
- **Provide adequate training.** Create a clear set of guidelines for access to social media page(s) and provide adequate training for staffers who will post and promote.
- **Have a purpose.** Social media accounts associated with student media should each have a focus statement reflecting the medium that governs their purpose (ie. live coverage, link pushing, social interaction, etc.). Social media accounts with different purposes should be clearly labeled and identified.
- **Avoid personal viewpoints.** Personal viewpoints should generally be avoided on staff-associated social media accounts. Avoid statements such as "Good luck Warriors!" and "You should all go out and support the soccer team!"
- **Avoid using mascots.** School mascots and mascot names should not be used for logos or other identification with the student media as it blurs the line of objectivity.
- **Create a friend/follow policy.** Staff social media accounts should have a written policy regarding friending. That policy should contain some statement that says friending is not an endorsement.
- **Create a policy on social media sharing.** Guidelines should note that all

reposts and sharing by the staff account could be considered endorsements.

### **Section 3:**

#### **A newsroom guideline for using social networks: Balancing the personal and the professional <sup>3</sup>**

Some journalists use social networks as a professional tool. Others use them strictly as a personal endeavor. Still others blend the functions. It is increasingly difficult to keep a staffer's social networking page strictly private and personal. To that end, journalists must recognize that everything on their Facebook or other social media page has the potential to influence their reputations and by extension the credibility of their newsrooms.

- **Don't post information that could embarrass you** or your newsroom, even if you believe your page is private.
- **Develop guidelines** about how the staff will approach the concept of privacy online. Even though the Internet is the most public of all media, journalists could do great harm if they reveal damaging information from others' sites. When should information remain private? When is harm justified? What steps can be taken to minimize the harm?
- **Use the tools**, such as limited profiles and privacy settings, to restrict access to your most private information.
- **Recognize that your actions can be misinterpreted.** You may sign up for a group to get story ideas, but people may see you as a fan. State your intentions often, in wall posts and other notifications. When appropriate, tell groups when you are signing up that you are looking for story ideas.
- **One strategy might be to sign up for lots of groups.** If you become a fan of a political party, become a fan of the other parties as well.
- **Manage your friends and their comments that appear on your social media pages.** Delete comments that damage your reputation and unfriend the author.
- **Don't comment** in personal social media about those on whom you professionally report.

#### Section 4: A newsroom guide for publishing online:

- **Publish news quickly, but not at the expense of fairness and accuracy.** Seek credible sources. Verify that sources are who they say they are. Verify information -- all facts, figures and statistics, regardless of how the information was collected and obtained. Seek permission to use all material – information, quotes, photos, artwork, etc. Cite sources for what you publish. Include how you obtained the information and under what circumstances. Educate yourself thoroughly about fair use and other copyright issues.
- **Don't quote friends.** Avoid interviewing friends, family members and others with whom you have personal or professional relationships. Seek guidance from an editor when in doubt, before arranging and conducting such interviews.
- **Be honest** about any circumstances that could appear to be conflicts of interest. Seek guidance from an editor when a story may concern you personally. If you proceed with the story, be up front about your involvement in the published work.
- **Clearly label opinionated content.** Opinion stories and columns should clearly be labeled as such when being pushed on social media.
- **Avoid using anonymous sources.** If faced with this issue, avoid granting anonymity until you have discussed the situation with an editor. Your media, print and online, should have a consistent policy on this.
- **Strive for a range of sources** reflecting the diversity of your school and local community.
- **Correct mistakes** and add a note to the top of the online story with the date, time and nature of the correction. Fix simple typos within the story; no note is needed.
- **Develop a work flow** for reporting, writing, editing, verifying and posting information online. Be sure everyone receives adequate training and knows their roles and responsibilities.
- **Clearly label staff-produced and audience-generated content.** Develop and publish procedures for accepting and monitoring content produced by others.
- **Link to other sites to offer additional or background information.** Be sure those sites are credible by finding out who publishes them and that they are up to date. Make sure the links work.

## **Section 5: A newsroom guide for handling online comments:**

*“The New York Times and The Washington Post have the two smartest teams of lawyers and editors in the world, and they’ve come to opposite conclusions. The Times is a review first/post later system and The Post is a post first/takedown later system. So there’s no industry standard or consensus.” – Frank LoMonte, Student Press Law Center*

- **Basically, there are two approaches for moderation of online comments:**

- Post first and then take comments down if they are inappropriate
- Moderate and only post those that meet criteria

A third option, of course, is to allow no comments at all, but that runs counter to media serving as a forum for public expression.

For the most part, the same principles apply to handling comments as with handling letters to the editor in print or guest commentary in broadcast or online, including verification of sources and information. Once the decision is made to publish user comments or responses, label them clearly, keeping in mind your journalistic credibility and commitment to accuracy.

- **How to handle inappropriate comments** (\*see model policy below)

Pulling down posted comments looks like censorship. And if you allow comments to be posted without moderating them first, you create the potential of incorrect and legally dangerous comments being captured/cached and available forever. Why publish something that jeopardizes your media’s ability to serve your community and then remove it after complaints or realizing it’s inappropriate? It’s all about the policy you establish, the atmosphere you seek to create on your site and your ability and willingness to enforce your rules and standards. Remember, if you edit comments and change the intent or meaning you are legally responsible for their content, according to Section 230 of the [Communication Decency Act](#).

- **Criteria for comments**

Just as you need a policy for letters to the editor, you need a policy for determining when you will allow comments. Consider:

Staffs are responsible for the content of comments on their sites. Ideally,

those making comments will use real, verifiable names and email addresses. If they don't, commenters could remain anonymous if the student editor knows their real names. Approving content ahead of time is not prior review because it is done by the student staff, not school officials. Anonymous comments should be taken down after a short time.

Use of real names is an ethical issue. Knowing who a person is can give comments clarity, meaning and context, and add credibility. Because part of the impact of using comments is about creating community where all can participate and feel safe, knowing identities generates trust in the commenter and the comment. Search engines pick up comments as if they were content, so you have an obligation not to spread falsehood; information must be verified

- **Be upfront and transparent about your policy and explain it thoroughly**

Student media can establish a forum by setting ground rules of prior approval/rejection without changing content unless cleared with the author. Do not edit or revise comment content. Revisions should be made by the author.

Once posted, comments or information should not be removed for transparency, accuracy and reality in terms of establishing a historical record.

- **Establish a procedure for handling comments**

Appoint an online editor and staff to vet comments (which means training for that staff on how to handle comments). Online comments should be signed with verifiable addresses and IDs that are verifiable. Require real names or IDs known by student editors or identify who will verify the names and identification before publication

Study other media, including *The New York Times*, The Poynter Institute and *The Washington Post*, for guidelines as part of the process of setting up a policy. Decide what is permissible in comments ahead of time and clearly publicize the criteria. An example would be no personal attacks. Also publish a statement that a student "editor" will contact the poster for information, clarification, to have writer correct grammar, etc.

\* **A model policy section** for handling comments might look like this, with content adapted from [The Washington Post](#), The Poynter Institute and introductory wording modeled on *The New York Times*:

## **Model Comment Policy**

We moderate comments to enable readers to share, without abusing others, informed and intelligent views that enhance the marketplace of ideas, focused to the topic of discussion not the presenter.

By posting comments:

1. **We recommend use of real names for commenting.** We will allow anonymous just like we allow anonymous sources provided we have verified the commenter's identity.
2. **You agree not to submit inappropriate content.** Inappropriate content includes any content (as defined by the [Student Press Law Center](#)) that:
  - Infringes upon or violates the copyrights, trademarks or other intellectual property rights of any person
  - Is potentially libelous or defamatory
  - Is obscene, pornographic, or sexually explicit
  - Violates a person's right to privacy
  - Violates any local, state, national, or international law
  - Contains or advocates illegal or violent acts
  - Degrades others on the basis of gender, race, class, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, or other classification
  - Is predatory, hateful, or intended to intimidate or harass
  - Contains advertising or solicitation of any kind
  - Misrepresents your identity or affiliation
  - Impersonates others
3. **You agree that you are fully responsible for the content that you submit.** You will promptly remove any content that you have posted should you discover that it violates these rules or that it is otherwise inappropriate.
4. **You understand and agree that we are not responsible for any user submitted content.** You further understand that we have the right, but not the obligation, to monitor submissions and we may remove content that we deem inappropriate. We further reserve the right, in our sole discretion, to remove a user's privilege to post content on our site.
5. **By submitting feedback, you agree to abide by these guidelines.**



*Sources:*

*(1) In 2006, The Poynter Institute gathered [a team of online journalists](#) from across the country to discuss the issues surrounding their work. They created a [set of guidelines for doing ethical journalism on the Web](#).*

*(2) These student guidelines are based on professional [online ethics guidelines](#) developed in 2009 by Kelly McBride of the ethics faculty at The Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, Fla.*

*(3) Adapted from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch*