

# Ethics and the copy desk: How to keep your paper pure

## Scenario 1

**Slot:** Mr./Ms. wire editor, Channel 5 is leading its 10 p.m. news with a story about a crash in Wisconsin involving a drunken driver that killed five local teens. Our local reporter says the cops won't tell her anything. Is there anything on the wire?

**Wire editor:** Nope. I'm afraid the only way you're going to get this story is to pull it off NBC's Web site. They've got a nice write-up here with pictures of the kids. Do you want me to pull it for you?

## Scenario 2

**Copy editor:** Hi, Ms./Mr. editor, I was calling because I had a couple of questions on the Wheaton College story about this religious group that's coming to speak.

**Editor:** Sure. What's up?

**Copy editor:** The story is written from the angle that the board of regents is allowing this group that some say is a cult to speak despite a petition drive to block the group. Well, when I was checking this group's Web site, I noticed that the petition was actually an on-line petition. It contains only about 20 signatures, and the majority of signers range from Darth Vader to Osama bin Laden to Gandalf.

**Editor:** I wasn't aware of that. I assumed the petition was circulated on campus.

**Copy editor:** Can we hold the story or at least rewrite it to reflect the only real objector to this group speaking is an opposing religious group?

**Editor:** I agree that the story would be better if local students were objecting, but I don't think this merits a rewrite. Go ahead and run it as is. If we need to, we'll do a follow-up.

## Scenario 3

**Slot:** One of our copy editors was arrested for talking back to a police officer who was trying to maintain order and control the crowd at a city-sponsored event. The officer had asked the copy editor to please move to a less-crowded area. The copy editor — who attended the event for his own enjoyment and not for the paper — told him that he's not moving anywhere,

and then flashes a company business card identifying himself as a member of the paper. He tells the officer that he has a right to be present.

**City editor:** The police department called me and our gossip columnist to say they have arrested one of our own. The gossip columnist smells an opportunity, but I think it embarrasses us. The gossip columnist plans to use the item, but cannot contact the copy editor for comment because the copy editor is in jail. I don't want to use the item because there's no comment from the copy editor.

**Slot:** Well, we've printed items before by the gossip columnist without comment from sources. Besides, the copy editor flashed his business card to the police and there were witnesses.

**City editor:** Ah, a slippery slope. I say we dodge this like a speeding bullet.

#### Scenario 4

**City editor:** A strip club has opened in town and residents are very upset about it. A group of "concerned citizens" organized the protest last night when the club opened. I sent a photographer to the event.

**Slot:** The photographer got some titillating photos. The group of "concerned citizens" had a unique way of showing their dislike of the club. A group built a billboard and mounted huge plastic breasts and large nipples on it. Words on the billboard say No Bare Breastes (cq) In Our Town.

**City editor:** Hey, I really like those photos.

**Slot:** Do we really want to put pictures of billboards with plastic boobies in the paper?

**City editor:** Oh yeah! Run that baby three columns at the top of the page. That will sell papers!

### Tips for maintaining high ethical standards

- Establish guidelines for ethics.
- Track errors; watch for dangerous patterns.
- Listen to your own pauses.

"Ethics and the copy desk" • American Copy Editors Society annual conference • March 2004  
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- Remember that it's your own face you have to look at in the mirror each morning — not an angry reporter or editor's. Did you do everything you could?
- Your colleagues on the copy desk hold a wealth of knowledge. When in doubt about something, ask one of your colleagues. Run something past them. Get a few opinions on photos or sentences in stories.

## **Resources:**

### **Miami Herald policy (abbreviated)**

- Staff members are not to use their positions with The Herald for profit, benefit or other advantage in any personal business or commercial transaction; or to cause anyone a financial loss. This applies to family, friends and acquaintances.
- Newsroom staff members should not free-lance for competing publications.
- We strive to attain the highest standards of journalism and to publish a newspaper that is fair, accurate and objective. We try to avoid all conflicts of interest. That, simply, is our goal.
- Staff members should avoid outside activities that conflict — or appear to conflict — with their jobs.
- Regarding confidentiality, don't promise confidentiality to any source in return for any story. When reporting a story, it is the reporter's responsibility to get every piece of information on the record and every quote possible for attribution.
- The use of unnamed sources is strictly forbidden unless a senior editor has been queried first.

### **Daily Herald guidelines for truth in reporting and editing**

- Plagiarism — taking the work of others and representing it as one's own — is strictly forbidden. It violates a fundamental principle the Daily Herald stands for: to tell the truth. It also is an offense that will have serious consequences.

As journalists we have a responsibility to make it clear to our readers where our information comes from. Material, both words and illustrations, taken from other publications must be attributed.

Danger exists even in borrowing from previous Daily Herald stories. Clips can be consulted for background and perspective on an issue, but avoid repeating entire sentences and recycling old quotations, which may have become outdated. Find a fresh way to say it — but only after verifying the accuracy of old information.

Attribution may not be necessary for simple facts that can be verified elsewhere. This includes dates and common knowledge within the public domain.

- The Internet as a source: The increasing amount of online information makes it easy to lift extensive material from other authors. While ideas can be gleaned from Internet sites, resist the temptation to pick up whole sentences and paragraphs without giving credit to their originator.

The Internet is best used as a tool for reporters to research topics and prepare for interviews. Use of written words of others from Web sites should be limited to more-complicated topics on which a particular expertise is required, such as law or science.

It is also important to verify the accuracy of information retrieved from the Internet. Some Web sites are noted as the “official” site of a particular organization or agency. Those might be more reliable, but, as with using any source, keep a fair and balanced approach in mind as you collect information from them.

Be sure to cite the name of the publication or the Web site from which the information was taken. If a Web site cites another source for material, it is imperative that you consult the original source to ensure its accuracy before using it.

- Crediting wire copy: When wire copy is combined with staff-written reports, the top byline should reflect who did the majority of the reporting and writing. For instance, if a staff writer adds information from the wire to flesh out a story, the writer’s name should be at the top with a wire credit at the end. That credit should read: “Daily Herald news services contributed to this report.” Conversely, if more of the words used are from the wire, the wire service should get the top byline and the reporter a credit at the end of the story.

When writers use even a single sentence verbatim from a wire story, they must credit the news service.

- Copyrighted material: Avoid being involved in a lawsuit by ensuring your work is original, not borrowed. Ideas and discoveries are not protected by U.S. copyright law, although the way in which they are expressed may be.

The “fair use” portion of copyright law allows the use of limited portions of a copyrighted work, including quotes, for news reporting. There are no legal rules permitting the use of a specific number of words or percentage of a work. Whether a particular use qualifies as fair use depends on the circumstances.

The owner’s permission must be obtained before using photos, graphics and other images found on the Internet. Often this takes only a quick phone call or e-mail. Some Web sites offer images for free use if you register.

When duplicating an entire news story that ran elsewhere, the original publication must be credited. In the case of The Associated Press posting a story from a direct competitor of the Daily Herald, “according a published report” will suffice for attribution.

- Bylines: A byline should tell the reader the name of the reporter or writer who is primarily responsible for the article. Bylines go to the writer or writers who contributed significantly to a story. Credit lines at the end of a story may be used when reporters participate in gathering

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the news. The main objective is to reflect fairly and accurately those most involved in producing a story.

Bylines on wire stories generally are removed, except on analyses and some features.

- **Datelines:** The dateline signals to readers the place of origin for a story. It also tells readers that the reporter has a direct connection to that location. A dateline should not be used in conjunction with a byline unless the writer was in that city and the bulk of the reporting was done there. However, the actual writing does not necessarily need to be done in that location.

- **Unnamed sources:** News stories should be fully documented and clearly attributed. Unnamed sources can be used only if all of the following apply: 1) we cannot obtain the information any other way, 2) the sources have good reason to expect serious reprisals if they speak on the record, 3) there is strong corroborating evidence, 4) we are satisfied the information is accurate, and 5) the story is of overriding significance to the community. Keep in mind that confidentiality is a contract between the newspaper and a source, not the reporter and the source.

The editor must be consulted in any decision to use an anonymous source.

In some cases, unnamed high-level sources can be quoted in wire copy, but caution should be used.

Care also must be taken in narrative-type stories. The attribution should ensure readers know the information is verifiable. Specify where the information comes from through a detailed editor's note or another form of attribution.

## **Poynter**

Poynter offers a variety of resources on ethics on its Web site, [www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org). It also has an ethics phone number that's staffed typically between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. Eastern time. That number is (877) 639-7817.