



RULES of the ROAD

*Navigating the new
ethics of local journalism*

Written by Scott Rosenberg

Edited by Jan Schaffer and
Andrew Pergam



Igniting news
ideas that work.



Rules of the Road: Navigating the New Ethics of Local Journalism was reported and written by Scott Rosenberg and edited by Andrew Pergam and Jan Schaffer.

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FOREWORD

When I commissioned “Rules of the Road,” I knew that entrepreneurial news startups were confronting entirely new ethical dilemmas. Our grantees emailed thorny questions, our panelists chronicled hard decisions, and we watched as site founders tiptoed through difficult decisions involving sustainability, privacy and participation.

The truth is, standard journalistic Codes of Ethics don’t adequately address some of the challenges news startups are facing as they work in communities comprised of readers, donors, advertisers and competitors. You’ll see nothing in this booklet, for instance, about plagiarism, staging news events, or Photoshopping images.

Instead, ethical judgments are arising serendipitously, generally informed by an ethos to do less harm. These “Rules of the Road” are very much a work in progress, shaped by a news landscape in which:

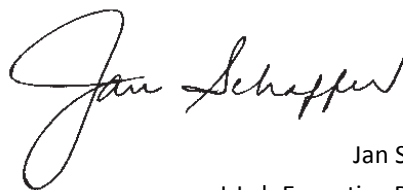
- The threshold for news is lower. Misdemeanors, not just felonies, constitute news.
- Stories unravel in real time. Editors post updates as they come in rather than wait for a fully baked story.
- “Google juice” makes micro news have a macro afterlife.
- Ethical decisions are as open to community feedback as the stories themselves.
- Attachment to the community is valued more than dispassionate detachment.

The good news is that the internal compasses of new site founders are working well. There is a notable lack of arrogance. Indeed, many site founders actually draw more stringent rules for behavior than traditional news organizations do. Many, for instance, insist on moderating comments before publication rather than allow any uncivil discourse to pepper their sites. All wrestle with competitive pressures over police-blotter reports, fully knowing that an arrest does not a conviction make.

Site editors interviewed have generously shared early mistakes that informed later policies.

Scott Rosenberg did an excellent job of distilling key takeaways. But they are not hard and fast rules. They are intended to help startup news sites chart a responsible course. We invite you to participate in the conversation. Please go to www.J-Lab.org/ethics to add your problem and solution.

We especially thank the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation, which made this guide possible.



Jan Schaffer
J-Lab Executive Director

**“THE RISE OF A NEW
WAVE OF INDEPENDENT
LOCAL NEWS WEBSITES
HAS SEEDED JOURNALISM’S
ETHICAL MINEFIELD
WITH A VARIETY
OF NOVEL PITFALLS.”**

—SCOTT ROSENBERG

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

WHAT'S NEWS

- Local news sites define news more broadly than larger news organizations and publish items and stories that traditional newsrooms might pass on.
- The closer a news site is to its community, the more its story choices are likely to be questioned.

POLICE REPORTS

- Standards vary widely, but most sites draw some sort of line at posting many of the names (and photos) in police reports.
- The line is often based on severity of the incident or charge. Most sites say they also omit the names of minors.
- Some try to report only on “public figures,” but that’s a difficult distinction to draw.
- Some sites say they won’t publish a name unless they can commit to following the case’s progress and disposition.
- A few sites post whatever information the police provide, in full (as do some larger local news organizations).
- Google and search mean any report can follow someone forever; one company’s “sunset” policy deletes all police items after six months.

PRIVACY

- Use of information users provide to your site is limited both by law and by your own privacy policy and terms of use. Be careful how you use it.
- The closer a news outlet is to the community it covers, and the smaller that community is, the more likely it is that readers will recognize a face, a name, or a license plate. Keep that in mind in coverage of crimes, accidents and similar stories.
- Sometimes journalists choose to violate a story subject’s privacy in the cause of some greater community good. If you do, think it through, and be prepared for a storm.

USING SOCIAL MEDIA

- Many sites treat “friend-only” Facebook profile material as private information. Most treat tweets as public statements.
- Editors need to consider that reports in social media are often unverified.
- Twitter can be a forum for fast story feedback, information vetting, and ethical debate.

COMMENTS AND ANONYMITY

- The majority of sites we talked to try to enforce a policy requiring commenters to use their real names.
- Many sites moderate all comments, reviewing them before they’re published. This takes lots of time and inhibits direct conversation, but protects discussions from shills, trolls, spammers and, potentially, libel suits.
- A few sites believe commenters have a right to anonymity, understanding that allowing anonymous comments demands extra vigilance in monitoring them.

COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTIONS

- Volunteer contributions from members of a local community allow small news sites to widen and deepen coverage in non-traditional ways.
- Clearly label the source of community-contributed content.
- Be transparent about contributors' backgrounds and surface any potential conflict of interest.

BUSINESS AND ADVERTISING

- Separate editorial and business roles where you can — but accept that it's sometimes impossible in smaller shops.
- Be forthright with advertisers and funders about exactly what they're buying.
- Identify advertisers when you write about them or topics that relate to their business.
- Tell readers about any line-blurrings that make you think twice.

GIFTS AND FREEBIES

- Local news sites generally look askance at accepting anything more valuable than a cup of coffee.
- Like many larger news organizations, they do often accept free tickets to entertainment events for review purposes.

ADVOCACY

- Some local news sites adhere to the tradition of journalistic impartiality and avoid advocating one side of public controversies.
- Others — probably the majority — embrace the alternative tradition of either representing a particular community point of view, promoting specific issues, even crusading for particular causes.
- In smaller organizations it's much harder to compartmentalize "news" and "opinion," or reporters and columnists — even if you want to.

CORRECTIONS AND REVISIONS

- When a story is edited post-publication, most sites make an effort to note the change.
- Site editors place errors into three rough categories (though these distinctions can be hard to draw):
 - Major substantive errors, misquotations and factual mistakes are fixed in the story and noted in a correction notice.
 - Minor errors are often corrected via strike through.
 - Trivial typos are usually corrected without notice.
- Some sites are beginning to provide Wikipedia-style "history" or "revisions" features that let readers track all changes made to a story after its initial publication.
- Most sites won't take down a whole story or post after it's published except in the rarest of circumstances, and any such "unpublishing" calls for an explanation to readers.

ETHICS POLICIES

- Most sites lack explicit written policies or guidelines, though a handful have invested the time and resources to create them.
- Many editors rely on internal compasses, often shaped by their professional journalism careers.
- With or without company policies, the best decisions get made when more people participate in the discussion.

INTRODUCTION

A teenager in your town commits suicide. You edit a hyperlocal news site covering a lot of police news. Should you report it? Should you publish the name?

A janitor at police headquarters gets fired because you quoted her criticizing the police chief. Are you to blame — and how far should you go in helping her win her job back?

A candidate who didn't buy ads on your website accuses you of bias towards a candidate who did. How do you respond?

You're covering a small-town council meeting and in the middle of a lively debate the speaker turns to you and says, "What do *you* think we should do?"

Local news organizations have faced painful questions like these as long as there has been pavement to pound. But the rise of a new wave of independent local news websites has seeded journalism's ethical minefield with a variety of novel pitfalls as well.

Like their predecessors at small community newspapers, the pioneers of the new local news online space grapple with tensions between running a business and serving the public, telling collective truths and protecting individual privacy, witnessing events and advocating causes. But on the web, they're operating with fewer traditions and rules and more confusingly blurred boundaries. Their creators usually embrace most of the traditional ideals of professional journalism, but they are far more permeable

to their readers, who can use the two-way medium to respond, contribute and criticize.

Often, these new online news organizations are as much a participant in the community's story as they are its chronicler. "The difference between a very local community site like this and a metro daily is that we are writing this for the community, and we live here," says David Boraks, founder of North Carolina's DavidsonNews.net. "So we're doing it *for* the community, it's not about the community so that outsiders can know what's going on here. That's a subtle distinction, but it makes a major difference when you're out there gathering news."

However close to its community a local news site might be, its reports can be borne by the Internet far beyond the edge of town — and thanks to the power of search engines, its work won't vanish into last week's recycling pile. These factors place new spins on old assumptions about journalism ethics and reawaken dormant arguments on fresh turf.

As the landscape of local news online today changes under our feet, we set out to chart how the publishers, editors and reporters shaping it are finding their ethical bearings. We conducted in-depth interviews with site founders and ethics experts to try to unearth some close-to-ground-level stories and derive some higher-level principles.

The organizations covering local communities online today run a wide gamut: from nonprofit to commercial, one-person shops to dozens-strong teams, and

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village-sized readerships to metropolitan audiences. That means, inevitably, that there are few bedrock rules or universally agreed-upon practices, and there's more seat-of-the-pants improvisation than carefully mulled decision-making. Written ethics policies of any kind are scarce — either because the newsrooms are simply too small, or editors believe that no formal policy can guide them well through the wilderness of problems that can come up.

We asked local news site editors and entrepreneurs where *they* saw ethical dilemmas most often crop up. Some topics that are staples in this field, like plagiarism, didn't enter the picture that much. Other areas where practices in traditional newsrooms are well-defined, like the editorial and advertising divide, turned out to be full of uncertainties and questions.

We've divided up our research by topic, and let the interviewees speak in their own voices about what ethical problems trouble them and how they've tried to handle them responsibly. In some cases we've also turned to a handful of experts on journalism ethics to offer their perspective. (Our transcripts have been lightly edited and trimmed.)

One we talked to, Donald Heider, the dean of the School of Communications at Loyola University in Chicago and founder of its Center for Digital Ethics and Policy, drew a useful distinction. In a 2005 paper written with two colleagues, Heider described journalists' self-image as a public watchdog sometimes conflicting with the public's desire for the press to serve in a different role — as a “good neighbor.”

“You found that tension a lot in the small-town papers and neighborhood suburban papers,” Heider says. “Because they know everyone and they're dependent on advertising from everyone, and so they want to be a good neighbor, they want to be the place where the community goes and feels safe. And yet at the same time, a big question is, are they going to ask the hard questions and do the hard stories?”

The tension between these roles can be confounding, but community papers have often been able to manage it well, and local news sites can, too, Heider says: “The way it usually plays out is, you give somebody a black eye and they're mad at you for a few days or a few weeks. But they get what you're doing overall, eventually, if you're fair. If you're tough on everybody. And you always give them a chance to respond.”

— Scott Rosenberg



SCOTT ROSENBERG Author of “Rules of the Road”

Writer, editor, and website builder Scott Rosenberg cofounded Salon.com in 1995 and served as its managing editor for six years. Today he runs MediaBugs.org, a public service for correcting errors in news coverage. Rosenberg is the author of “Dreaming in Code” and “Say Everything: How Blogging Began, What It’s Becoming, and Why It Matters.”

**“I THINK THAT
HAVING DISCUSSIONS
AND MAKING GOOD
DECISIONS IS MORE
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PEOPLE A LIST OF DOS
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—STEVE BUTTRY

WHAT'S NEWS?

Key Takeways:

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Howard Owens, The Batavian
An arresting photo op

For us, every single story goes on the home page, even minor stuff. That makes a huge difference. And having everything on the front page creates this aura that we have more news than the daily newspaper. Which empirically is not true. We have a lot because we cover only one county and they cover three. Whatever we publish we almost always have before they do.

One thing I didn't think about with putting everything on the front page is that, just by the mere fact of being where all the traffic is, it elevates the notability, the importance of each story. The typical misdemeanor/DUI arrest doesn't wind up on the front page of the newspaper. It's on like D6. We publish every DUI arrest, misdemeanor, felony, traffic accident on the home page.

So when we were still [owned by] Gatehouse, a former football star got arrested. People were jumping in the comments, beating up on us for making a spectacle of this guy who got arrested. We had a mugshot and a whole story. I only learned later about who this guy was in the community and why it touched a nerve with so many people. They said, "It's not news." And I said, the guy got arrested, police release went out, we published it.

We don't get those kinds of complaints any more. A friend of mine who's an attorney has told me I should watch my back — I've pissed a lot of people off. He tells the story of one of his clients who got arrested

on a DUI, and her parents found out only because it was on the Batavian.

Last summer there was an accident a few doors down from us. I figure I'll pop in, take a picture. Get down there, it's not even a fender-bender. But one of the firefighters says, you ought to stick around and watch the field sobriety test on this guy. So I positioned myself against a wall about 75 yards away and took a whole series of pictures. And you can see the guy clearly losing his balance.

Several readers just exploded in rage that I would publish that. They said it was an invasion of privacy, I was unduly embarrassing this guy, he hasn't been convicted.

We didn't name him. I thought it was a great little photo essay of what a field sobriety test is like. People said, why don't you go out and get pictures of every field sobriety test? I'm not there for every test, and they don't all happen in the middle of the day right on Main Street. So while I got a lot of flak from readers, every law-enforcement person I've come across loved it. It shows them doing their job, what a field sobriety test is and the dangers of drinking and driving.

All I wanted was good pictures, I wasn't doing it as a sop to law enforcement or to piss off readers. It was one of our most-read posts for 2010, but for me it was an opportunity to get something really interesting that you don't see everyday.

Lance Knobel, Berkeleyside
Concern over boldface names

Somebody offered to write a boldface names column for us, and we quietly demurred — partly because I think that’s not really Berkeley, but it’s also because of a kind of unease with where that leads. It would inevitably lead to: did you see who Mayor Bates was walking with? We don’t want to be that.

Maybe we’re slightly high-minded in that way. Certainly things like: the magnolias are blossoming now, here’s a nice picture. Is that news? No, not really. But if you walk around on a lovely February day and you feel, gosh, isn’t this wonderful, it’s nice to be able to record that in some way on the site.

Liz George, Baristanet
Some people just don’t want coverage

There’s this veterinarian in the town who’s much beloved. People had been talking about this guy. Then a story presented itself, somebody wrote in. So we were going to go over and take a photo. But he didn’t want to be a part of it. I don’t know if he didn’t like our website or what. Everybody had always written about him in comments in such a glowing way. But we respected him and said, we’re not going there, it’s not worth it. We could write about other things that involve him, but we weren’t going to go do a profile on somebody that didn’t want to have a profile.

Paul Bass, New Haven Independent
Drawing the line

We decided not to do what they do in LA — we’re not interested in putting the rankings of teachers by name. I guess these are ideological decisions. We’re intensely covering how you come up with standards and parameters for doing school reform, and we’re going to report on how individual schools do in the bigger breakdown. But because the ratings can be so arbitrary, we felt uncomfortable with the idea of including the names of individual teachers. On the other hand, I won an FOIA case where we were

allowed to get the job evaluations of managers in city, government and we published them.

Part of it is, what makes a public figure? There are different gradations of that in the law, and there are different gradations of that ethically. A lot of people are in grey areas. Some people are very definitely public figures: public money’s being spent, the job they perform has a public impact — that’s an easy one, the manager of a city department. School-teacher feels a little different. Even though it’s a public job, they’re not in charge of things. I’m not saying that’s right, but that’s how the line gets drawn.

Andrew Chavez, the109/Schieffer
School of Journalism
Extracting Data

We have a scraper that hits the medical examiner’s website that pulls in all of the deaths, geocodes and maps them, and posts them on our site. We’ve never had a bit of negative feedback on that. It’s actually an area that gets a pretty significant amount of traffic for us.

That’s a case where we saw a database that was not really searchable, there was no way you could extract data from it, it was just a flat page sitting on their site that you had to thumb through by day to get meaningful information. We’ve been scraping it now for five or six months.

That wasn’t our first choice — there were other databases here we wanted to scrape. We’ve had several programmers take a crack at them, but they’re just built in such an archaic fashion that we cannot get the information out.

During election season we’ve gone and gotten from the state all of the election contributions from people in the ZIP [The 109’s coverage area is one ZIP code]. Pretty soon, through the Texas Tribune, we’ll have salaries for all of the school districts in the ZIP. So we’re looking into different areas to augment what we’ve already got on the site. ■

POLICE REPORTS

Key Takeaways:

- *Standards vary widely, but most sites draw some sort of line at posting many of the names (and photos) in police reports.*
- *The line is often based on the severity of the incident or charge. Most sites say they also omit the names of minors.*
- *Some try to report only on “public figures,” but that’s a difficult distinction to draw.*
- *Some sites say they won’t publish a name unless they can commit to following the case’s progress and disposition.*
- *A few sites post whatever information the police provide, in full (as do some larger local news organizations).*
- *Google and search mean any online report can follow someone forever; one company’s “sunset” policy deletes all police items after six months.*

Tracy Record, West Seattle Blog Media has changed, the rules have not

I have carried with me the same rules that I generally followed in my previous work in old media. One of them is not identifying suspects until they’re charged, with a few exceptions. Such as a confession. Although I don’t go for that one as much — because, as people have pointed out, who says they’ve confessed, the police? What if they’re not telling the truth?

I try to follow up on every case that’s serious enough for us to have gone to the point of reporting charges. We also don’t show faces until somebody’s charged or goes to court.

That gets to be a problem for us in this one way. In this world where everybody’s got their cellphone cameras or their surveillance cameras, sometimes we’ll get a note from someone that says, I got this on my surveillance camera and want you to put up this picture, because this is the guy who broke into

my car! And in one sense that’s great, we’re all about neighborhood watch. But on the other hand, unless their video or photo literally shows the person red-handed — they’re getting there and the hammer is breaking the window on the car glass — I won’t do that. Sometimes that’s drawn a little bit of ire, because I can’t just take their word for it. That still goes against the grain of innocent until proven guilty.

I can’t control whether they put it on their own website. And they might come into the forum on my site and tell people about it — I’m not going to prohibit them from posting that. But I won’t go for putting that person’s picture in front of 30,000 or more readers if I don’t have proof.

Sometimes doing that you feel like the person with their finger in the dike. I don’t know if at some point in the future it’ll be too late, no one can enforce anything like that, it’s just all out there. I’ll be really sad if it gets to that point.

Liz George, Baristanet
Search engine 'juice' hurts arrestees

We didn't want to start putting in people's names with DUIs. We found we had pretty good Google juice. And any time somebody got arrested, maybe it was something like shoplifting, if we'd put the names in, people would write to us later on and say, can you please remove this, because now every time anybody searches for me this is what comes up, and I've moved past this, my life is different — or, it turns out, I wasn't even guilty. You hear all these stories. And it became a nightmare of: what do you do? We also feel, do people really care about a lot of these smaller violations? Do readers really want to hear about Joe Blow who got arrested because he didn't have his headlight?

I think we typically try not to put the most boring stuff from the blotter in there. Sometimes that means we don't publish names, because those are a lot of the reports that end up having names. Another way of handling it is to link to a document at the blotter. You highlight or pull out the stories that are bigger, a burglary or something like that — they're looking for a suspect, this is the description. Then, if there's other stuff, link to the blotter.

We do really have a lot of Google power, and we don't want to use it to ruin somebody's life.

—Liz George

We are a little more shared, and consumed in a different way, than the local newspaper was. So it's a tough one. I don't feel entirely comfortable we're doing exactly the right thing. If the mayor got a DUI, you're not going to post it? Is it ethical to not do it for some people, but only for public figures? And who's that?

I'm almost more comfortable with just putting everybody in. But then people get upset! And we're a business. And we care. It does suck for someone to have something follow them around forever. We do really have a lot of Google power, and we don't want to use it to ruin somebody's life.

Howard Owens, the Batavian
Sympathy? Show me the documentation

Everybody looks at it from the alleged perpetrator's standpoint: you're tarring this person with this arrest record. [Issues of guilt, innocence or veracity of the police report won't be determined until down the road.] I look at it as, show me where you weren't convicted, and then we can talk about taking it down. But the flip side of that is, if you were convicted of something, is it really my place to hide that information from an employer who might find it?

People call up and say, "I want my name removed." I'd be willing to remove an arrest that proves to be completely bogus. But if the person was convicted of something, how much sympathy should I have?

Most recent one was a guy who called me from Pennsylvania, said he got busted for trespassing, the charges were dismissed, he wanted me to remove it. My standard response was: send me documentation and then I can make a decision. He hemmed and hawed, finally said he didn't have anything. I have a good relationship with the clerk at that court, so I said I'll see what I can get. What I found was, the charges weren't exactly dismissed — they were reduced from a misdemeanor trespassing charge to an infraction of disorderly conduct. I was going to update the post with that information but I never heard from him again.

David Boraks, Davidson News
Felonies are my line

I have a policy of not using names in most police cases. We publish minute, detailed stuff — a speeding ticket on Main Street. And I decided early on that my site was not about pointing fingers at all of us for the things that we do wrong, but more about capturing the general idea that people speed on Main Street, and where the speed traps are, how the police department is enforcing the law.

You really have a responsibility to follow cases through the court system. And what the heck, I'm not going to follow all the speeding tickets.

Now all of the media that I compete against, including several weeklies that publish the exact same data that I do, do publish names. So I look a little bit foolish. But I'm constantly trying to get people to understand that just because information's available from a public source doesn't mean we have an obligation to publish it.

I draw two lines. One is that it has to be a felony or above before I will put someone's name in. And I do my best to follow up on the felony cases. The other line is, I do not use the names of kids under age 16. If they're age 16 and it's a felony then I will use their name. Of course there's always an exception. Sometimes an incident is so high profile it begs to have the person's name.

We had an egregious example of this dilemma recently where a bunch of teenagers were having a party and they all got drunk and stoned and one of the kids fell out a second-floor window and was seriously injured. So I wrote about the case and have been following it closely. Although the names of several witnesses were made public in search warrants the police put out, I decided to adhere to my policies. I didn't use any names. Some of the other publications that I compete against published all the kids' names, their addresses and everything, and all of them were 16 or 17 years old. A couple of weeks later, the police issued citations for underage drinking and for providing alcohol to minors. Neither of those crimes meets my test for felony, so I still didn't

publish their names — I said they're students at such and such a school.

I suppose you could make an argument that with this one, since it was covered so much by everyone else, I should just use names. But where do you draw the line? If somebody else uses it, is that a good enough reason to use it? I don't think so. I didn't even publish the name of the victim.

This gets into a squishy area, but I also feel like people who are accused of something are embarrassed by it, their friends around them all know it. I don't feel like it's necessary for me to publish names just to publish names. There's not really a compelling community interest there. I think on the contrary there's a prurient interest.

I get some hate mail from people who wish I would publish every last name and the mugshots and everything. But I feel like, this is us. This is not some people in another place, or another town, in the big city nearby where you can look at it and have some bizarre satisfaction that people elsewhere are doing bad things. This is us. The community handles these things in its own way.

Another example: a case recently of a fellow in town who was accused of hitting his wife. Some acquaintances of mine know the guy — he works at the local college — and I got some emails saying, you need to write about this, put his picture in there! But most people don't know this guy. If he was a public figure, if it had been a member of the town board, I think it would've been a little bit of a different story. So I didn't publish his name. But I posted the address, domestic assault.

For a couple of weeks there was a campaign by some people to get this guy's name and picture on my website. People were really questioning my credentials as a journalist and member of the community and wondering if I am going soft and protecting people. I didn't want to cave into it. With any kind of a policy, you need to stick to your policy.

In the end, it was like five minutes in court, and the charges were dropped. I did follow it through — I wanted to know if I had made a mistake or not. I also wanted to be able to say to people, we need to be careful about this.

Barry Parr, Coastsider
Being mindful of who you spotlight

I didn't feel comfortable publishing the names. It's a small town. Everybody knows everybody else. You're

I don't feel like it's necessary for me to publish names just to publish names. There's not really a compelling community interest there. I think on the contrary there's a prurient interest.



David Boraks

not guilty till you've been convicted. It just seemed a little too intrusive to publish that information.

The one area that made me a little uncomfortable about not publishing the names was that a lot of the names, a disproportionate percentage, were Hispanic. I think it would have been interesting for folks in the community to know the character of the way that the laws were enforced in the community. But on balance I felt it was right to take the names out.

Kat Powers, Wicked Local
A six-month sunset policy

Our police logs run in print, they also run online. In about a week, that police log item in print will get recycled in the trash bin. Online, our police logs sunset in six months.

We really struggled with how to deal with this. I was working in a city of 86,000 people where police news and weird police news not only was very well read but got attention in our larger Boston-area markets. There are always those police stories in Somerville, Mass. It seems to be more extreme and weirder and sometimes funnier than you'll get in most outlets. We'll cover everything from the local prostitution bust to immigration enforcement arrests that touch a nerve.

What changed my mind was, a woman called and said: I'm a prostitute, I totally understand that you're going to put my name in the paper because I got arrested, but you should take it down. I said, why? She said, the cop lied. And there are details you have online that are not true. And I had a good long conversation with her about the whole ethics of her name being in a police log, how long should it be online. She's running a business, she knows it's a criminal enterprise, but her business is being affected by information that is not true that we put online as a result of her arrest.

The problem is, sometimes we're attributing things to a police report, which is not absolutely correct. And I've been a victim of crime where I've read the story after the fact and said, "Where'd you get that?" and they said, "It was in the police report." "What? No way!"

It took this woman calling me to get it through my head. So I became one of the advocates in our newsroom for the six-month sunset policy. Stuff lives online forever, but we're going to have a policy of forgiveness. That's been in place about two years.

We do have cases where people will come to us and say: I was arrested, my ex-husband was saying I was abusing the child because he wants to win custody, but now my employer has seen it online — I need you to take it down so I don't lose my job. We will take it down if the case has been dismissed, or people can prove it is untrue. Those are the only folks who escape the six-month rule.

Mike Orren, Pegasus News
Changing course on naming sex offenders

We never got down to the level of DUIs. The philosophy was, if it was worth posting, it's worth being part of the record. Our take would have been, if you're gonna take it down in a year, why post it in the first place?

We did change our tack on one type of story: in the early days we would post alerts of sex offenders moving into a neighborhood. And over time we got turned around by our user base on that. We had a couple of really active users, people known in the community, who had either falsely been accused of sex crimes at one point in their lives, or it was the sort of thing where the 18-year-old guy slept with the 17-year-old girl and therefore got labeled a sex offender. Over time we just got convinced that there was not enough public good in posting these alerts versus the possible damage we were doing by not having the time to research each case. So we stopped that about three or four months into our launch.

Paul Bass, New Haven Independent
No names, period

We don't print the names of people who were arrested, and we don't put the race of people in it, so some of the racists are really upset.

We do a daily roundup, a summary of crimes, but we don't include the names. We've always had this policy.

Tom Warhover, Columbia Missourian/
Missouri School of Journalism

Until we can track outcomes, we won't use names

Where I am, I've got this whole passel of faculty and bright students to deliberate together. And ultimately we came down with both a desire and a policy. The desire was to create a better tracking system so that you could essentially continue to report out however a case is adjudicated. That system, to my knowledge, does not exist. Certainly it does not exist in Columbia, Missouri. And therefore until we get such a system,

To say that we're not going to consider the impact of search is to say we don't care about harm.

—Steve Buttry

The principle behind this is simple: it's fairness. Fairness should be one of those core values of journalism. And it's not fair to put up that Tom Warhover has been arrested for X, Y, or Z, and then not say, Tom Warhover was found not guilty.

The argument is specious to simply dismiss it and say, well, the information has always been public. There's public and then there's public.

Steve Buttry, Journal Register Company
When policies and principles conflict

This is the classic conflict in the first two of the core principles of the SPJ Code of Ethics: you seek truth and report it — and you minimize harm. Sometimes they come in conflict. Because seeking truth and reporting it causes harm. So you need to decide, OK, what if anything do we do to minimize that harm, or do we just decide that this truth is so important that it needs to be out there and cause whatever harm it causes?

The persistence of Google has changed the extent and duration of harm. The phrase "minimize harm" requires us to ethically consider the *extent* of harm. Because "minimize" is about the quantity and degree

of harm. So the old "let the chips fall where they may" is a simplistic approach that's probably not worthy of the good journalists who say it reflexively. You do need to consider the damage. OK, how old is the suspect? How serious is this offense? How important is it that the public know about the offense and know who did it?

To say that we're not going to consider the impact of search is to say we don't care about harm. If we're journalists who follow that code of ethics, we do care about harm. So it needs to be part of the discussion. But it doesn't say, "cause no harm." We're not physicians.

Donald Heider, Loyola School
of Communication
Ask yourself the right questions

People have a right to ask, if you reported that I was arrested, did you also report that the charges were dropped, or I was released, or I was found not guilty? And then when a search is done, what pops up first? If the charges always pop up first, I think you have a valid claim to go back to the news organization and ask them to rethink how they've archived the story.

In some other countries they don't put a name in until you're indicted or convicted. We have a low threshold here — all you have to do is be a "person of interest" and we'll put your name in, in many instances. So the question it raises is, are we re-victimizing somebody over and over?

I've been in cities where the newspapers would run names of people arrested in a sting operation. You just know one narrow set of facts, you don't know anything else about the story, and to publish those names in the paper is pretty heavy stuff. It can and often is life-changing for those people. ■

Stuff lives online forever, but we're going to have a policy of forgiveness.

Kat Powers



PRIVACY

Key Takeaways:

- *What you do when information that users provide to your site is limited both by law and by your own privacy policy and terms of use. Be careful!*
- *The closer a news outlet is to the community it covers, and the smaller that community is, the more likely it is that readers will recognize a face, a name, or a license plate. Keep that in mind in coverage of crimes, accidents and similar stories.*
- *Sometimes journalists choose to violate a story subject's privacy in the cause of some greater community good. If you do, think it through, and be prepared for a storm.*

Mike Orren, Pegasus News Sticking to policy

A couple of years ago during a city council election in Dallas, we had a big story that probably changed the results of an election — and a lot of it came from work around who had done what on our website.

We had somebody during the city council race come in and post a comment on one of the candidate pages, which showed all of that candidate's contributors. It said that they couldn't believe this person was up for city council because they've been convicted of multiple felonies and lied about it. So we did what is our general policy with an accusation like that — we remove the comment. It doesn't just disappear, it always says, "This comment removed by site staff," and we post a comment explaining why we removed it. We said, the last comment contains serious allegations that aren't substantiated, and we've got to look deeper into it to let you know if it is legit or not.

At the same time that went down, we got a user who had registered for the site who emailed us to say, I never registered for this account, I don't

know why I got this confirmation email, what the hell? Our CTO started investigating that — we took it seriously. Long story short, the email claiming that they'd never signed up for the account came from the son of the opposition candidate, who lived in San Antonio. And the comments with the allegations — which were partially true, it wound up — were posted from the same IP address. So in the end what we wound up breaking was, (a) one of the city council candidates has felonies she hadn't disclosed, and (b) her opposition candidate is the one throwing this out there.

There was a lot of discussion in our user community, and everybody tended to really come down on our side. But how did they feel about our manipulating IP address data and email address data to figure this stuff out? We just laid it all out for everyone to see.

Andrew Huff, Gapers Block The client's always right, right?

We published an image of a classified ad, exactly as it had been printed, and that included a phone number. The placer of the ad threatened us with legal

action if we did not remove the phone number. At that point, it had been six months since the post had gone up, so we removed it, we just obscured the number so he wasn't getting calls any more. It was kind of funny to me that he was upset about his phone number being out there, since he put it in an ad! But I guess he was getting harassing calls.

Liz George, Baristanet
Taken some items down as a courtesy

I wouldn't write about a kid without permission. Photos of kids, too, unless it's a situation where it's outside, or they've given consent or whatever.

Very infrequently, you do get people who are characters, they're public figures in the town. Which is a funny thing to say — we're not talking about Madonna. But the local public figure's fair game, in our mind. I don't mean hunting them down. But if they're going to say stuff, it's out there, we'll report on it, and they know that. We're not going to make fun of them. We're also very sensitive to the fact that they are public figures, out in the limelight. It's a balance.

I'm talking about any council member. A mayor. Stephen Colbert is a public figure in our town, he lives there. Bobbi Brown. Although we're not gonna talk about her children.

The local public figure's fair game, in our mind. I don't mean hunting them down. But if they're going to say stuff, it's out there, we'll report on it, and they know that.

—Liz George

We had an issue with Whoopi Goldberg, where we wrote that she moved to a neighboring town we cover. We wrote about the area, we didn't give the address, but we mentioned some details — stuff that's public record. We're not the only website that had it. And we got a call from her lawyer asking us to take it down. It had already been up for a while. So we did take it down, as a courtesy. First of all, we didn't want the hassle, even though we felt we were completely in our rights. We'd already got the mileage

out of it. And she was really concerned about stalking, that's what the lawyer was saying. Again, we're local, and we have that Google juice. If Gawker writes about it, people are reading it all over New York, but they're not necessarily in Jersey, in stumbling distance.

Barry Parr, Coastsider
Handling suicide

Someone I knew who managed a couple of websites about local history died just about a year ago and it turned out that she committed suicide. I did not report that she committed suicide. I'm not sure what a mainstream news organization would have done in that situation. It was a case where it didn't feel like it was the community's business.

David Boraks, Davidson News
Double-check on your permissions

I try to get IDs on every photo I run. One of the local daycare centers is always inviting me over to take pictures, but they won't provide any IDs. The remainder of the daycares round here all have foreseen the issue and they get the parents to sign releases.

There was one case where, with the help of a teacher at this one daycare, I did a story and got a picture that ran on the site. I got incredibly hostile mail from the people who ran the center, saying I didn't have permission. And I was working with a teacher, so I thought I was on safe ground. So my policy is to make sure when I go to these places that people know I'm about to publish it on the web.

Howard Owens, The Batavian
License to run a photo from a fatal crash

There was a fatal accident. And I had a really good news shot that showed both cars. I'm the only one who got the shot — I stuck around till the firetruck moved. But the front car, the car that had the passenger in it that was fatal, you can clearly see the license plate. I published that picture before the name was released, which means not all the notifications had gone out.

I got blasted by a reader whose daughter drives the same kind of car with a license plate that also begins with the three letters it had. She called her daughter in a panic. But she said the lady who was next to her wherever they were saw the picture and was devastated — she knew whose car it was. But she was just a friend, so she wouldn't have been part of the notification chain.

So maybe in the future I need to be mindful of obscuring the license plate, or just waiting another couple of hours. One of the things that played into my position was that the daily newspaper had published a picture with the license plate before I did. On the other hand, this came up in comments, that photo also probably reassured a lot of people: that is not *my* daughter's car. It comes back again to who am I to judge?

Kat Powers, Wicked Local
Sometimes a story has to be more than just a story

We had a rash of suicides. Health officials later came in and said it was an issue where kids were killing themselves and/or having fatal drug overdoses and it was becoming a contagion. Kid A thinks he's shit, kills himself. Kid B feels he's shit, sees that Kid A has

Maybe in the future I need to be mindful of obscuring the license plate, or just waiting another couple of hours.

—Howard Owens

been celebrated in the paper, with little roadside memorials, that sort of thing, kills himself thinking that he'll then become somebody because he's killed himself. And I didn't know what it was when I was first reporting on it. It's a drug overdose. I had never heard of this contagious suicide.

Then we started figuring it out. OK, we have another 19-year-old dead kid, what do we do? This was the stage where kids were being overprescribed Oxycontin for sports injuries, and then they chew them to get around the time release — 8 hours all at once. He was chewing Oxycontin, he died. I said, OK, I'm sick of the dead kids — this is going to stop. We're going

to cover this like his death, and the process of his death, was a news event. So I went in and I got every detail I could — coroner's reports, folks tipping me off in the hospital. I worked this like this was the president had been shot, and had a reporter who was totally game, too, busting his ass on it. We wrote a story that basically said, this kid did not die this glorious death that you are envisioning: he died because he choked on his own vomit. This is not glamorous; this was horrid. We're not going to glorify this child's life; we're gonna say how horrid his death was, because this stops now.

The day this story came out, 11 kids went to health services at the high school and got help...I don't know that I would do that twice.

—Kat Powers

We named the kid who died. He was from a very prominent family, his grandfather had been a city official. Very well-known. Something wrong happened in this kid's life, some bad choices got out of control.

When the story came out, I had a group of young men who had pills jangling in their pockets and glassy eyes come in and physically threaten me in my office. I had a woman who called the publisher and said what I had done was horrible, and she hoped that I died by choking on my own vomit — which got his attention.

But the day this story came out, 11 kids went to health services at the high school and got help. That was 11 kids in my column, I thought. I don't know that I would do that twice.

Steve Buttry, Journal Register Company
Be upfront and use your judgment

The first ethical issue I had to deal with as the editor of the Cedar Rapids Gazette was the guy who came into my office wanting to know who the commenter was on our site who had accused him of sexual assault. Which of course raised issues. Somebody had already spotted that and removed it, but we didn't prescreen our comments, so someone was free to accuse somebody of sexual assault on our website.

But then secondly, do I give this person whatever identification we have, which would be IP address and email address that they used to register? The “never reveal your sources” part of me that spent so long as a reporter, its initial reaction is “no.” But then my second reaction is, wait a second — when I promise somebody confidentiality, we have a discus-

Each person has to decide for themselves that ethical template. Which is, what are the overriding needs in terms of privacy versus public information — or public knowing.

—Tom Warhover

So should the terms of service (or somewhere more public, since nobody reads the terms of service) say that if you violate the terms of service, if you defame somebody, we’ll supply your contact information? First of all, we’re going to need to decide whether to even allow anonymous comments. But if we’re going to allow them, we’re not going to protect people who don’t play by our rules. When I make a deal with a source, I might tell that person, if you’re lying to me then I will give you up. So when you think it through and have these discussions, you’re not going to end up with a “thou shalt not” rule, or a simple rule. You can have standards, but then you use judgment as you apply them in particular situations.

sion face to face. I ask, why are we going off the record? Am I willing to go to jail as necessary to protect this person’s identity? We had no such discussion with this asshole who was commenting — I didn’t even know if the comment was true. So it’s not the same thing.

Tom Warhover, Columbia Missourian
Know your own ethical template

Privacy issues are where the lessons from community newspaper editors come to the fore. Because you might be looking at that person the next morning at the diner. And frankly I think that’s healthy. You ask yourself, first thing: OK, when I see this person across the table whether it’s tomorrow or the next day, do I have a good response other than the kneejerk “it’s public information?”

And each person has to decide for themselves that ethical template. Which is, what are the overriding needs in terms of privacy versus public information — or public knowing? So for instance, we don’t report suicide for people over, I think it’s 50, because we don’t report cause of death over 50. The presumption is, somebody dies before 50, it’s an unnatural thing and therefore the public wants to know what happened. But you gotta work through that before it comes up. Then at least you have an explanation that’s more than just “We’re a newspaper. We’re a news site.” Then at least you can hold your head up regardless of whether the arguments afterward make you change your mind, which has happened to me more than once. ■

When you think it through and have these discussions, you’re not going to end up with a “thou shalt not” rule, or a simple rule. You can have standards, but then you use judgment as you apply them in particular situations.



Steve Buttry

USING SOCIAL MEDIA

Key Takeaways:

- *Many sites treat “friend-only” Facebook profile material as private information. Most treat tweets as public statements.*
- *Editors need to consider that reports in social media are often unverified.*
- *Twitter can be a forum for fast story feedback, information vetting, and ethical debate.*

Scott Lewis, Voice of San Diego
Twitter puts everyone and every conversation in the spotlight

Here in San Diego, everyone — from political leaders to labor leaders to business and the Republican party head, and the chief of police’s lawyer, and the head of the taxpayers association, and then all of the reporters in town — people have all been very engaged on Twitter. The ethics breaches in journalism — not citing an original report about an issue, lack of disclosure, corrections — are all getting vetted on Twitter here. Sources are using it as a way to hold journalists accountable and vice versa. Everybody in town has their feed going as they’re watching each other argue.

How often have editors gotten complaints or concerns about accuracy and just sort of let it be? Now, you let it be and you’re in the spotlight.

—Scott Lewis

It’s snipey and unproductive in many areas, and it’s gotten to the point where we’ve had to talk about turning the cheek on a lot of things. On the other hand it’s also an incredibly effective tool, and I think it’s actually corrected journalism here in a way unlike anything I’ve seen before. You know, you didn’t cite us in this, even though you did that.

Or, are you sure about this figure, where did you get that figure? Or, a graph will be off and we’ll get a correction request about it through Twitter from the graphics editor at the Union-Tribune.

It’s this marketplace of vetting of each other’s content and ethics that I’ve never imagined before. And it’s through this medium that a lot of these arguments and accusations have come out in the last two or three years.

It’s not organized. It’s very random. At the beginning, there was the notion that Twitter wasn’t a very serious medium. But you’re writing, and it’s public, and you hold a public position — it’s a big deal. I think we’ve gotten over that now, everyone takes it very seriously and watches what they say a little better.

Then, just the other day, I was arguing with a labor leader about a plan to regulate Walmart here. We’d run ads from Walmart several weeks ago. And she said, you can continue to split hairs if you want because of all the money you took — something like that. Ouch! That’s quite an accusation.

There was a city councilman the other day, a very mild-mannered nice guy, who wrote on Twitter that a KPBS story, the local public radio, was ludicrous and offensively wrong, or something like that. They had it out on Twitter for a while.

How often have editors gotten complaints or concerns about accuracy and just sort of let it be? Now, you let it be and you're in the spotlight.

Tracy Record, West Seattle Blog
Facebook comments aren't always public

I won't use images from Facebook unless I have someone's specific permission. I tend to assume that everything is copyright or it belongs to somebody on websites, whether it's Facebook or your own personal site or a company site or whatever, unless permission is obtained. It's a line that few seem to be holding any more, but as long as I can I will. In terms of quoting people, that's a little bit different. If there's something that's a matter of public safety, I might say, well, they posted on their Facebook page, they said they're gonna kill somebody, or something like that.

For example, we had a case where a gentleman was arrested after an incident where he was apparently, allegedly trying to commit "suicide by cop." Someone pointed me to his Facebook page the next day, and it had some rantings — it was clear that he was probably mentally disturbed. And I could have chosen to say, well, here's an interesting story about how this guy that just got involved in this incident, was definitely seemingly not in his right mind, and mentioned that. And I thought, you know what? To me this is personal, it's not just sitting out there

It's also an incredibly effective tool, and I think it's actually corrected journalism here in a way unlike anything I've seen before.



Scott Lewis

on the open web, I really had to be pointed by someone to the unique name that this guy used on his Facebook page. It just doesn't seem like it's open season on all that until and unless it's written in the Facebook terms of service or something that everything that's published here is free and open unless you hide it behind a privacy wall.

If I'm going to quote a tweet, I'll pull its discrete URL and link to it.

Barry Parr, Coastsider
Verify everything

I don't run anything that I can't verify. A couple of years ago, my daughter had heard something via Facebook that one of the students from the high school had gotten hurt somehow. And unless I could get a verification I wouldn't run any of that.

Mike Orren, Pegasus News
The public view

In our shop, we had clear rules: It was fair game if you could access their page without being their friend. If it was in question, the reporter would log out from Facebook, and if the page was hidden from them, then they couldn't use it. At least without some further confirmation. As far as picking up stuff from other sources and taking it as accurate, we really use our judgment. If it was a trusted source and was not going to harm anyone, we would take it at face value.

Paul Bass, New Haven Independent
A complicated case

Columbia Journalism School did a whole case study of our use of information from Facebook in covering the Annie Le murder case in 2009. Read it at: <http://bit.ly/nhi-casestudy>.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: The case centers on the Independent's internal debate on how far to go in using material found on the Facebook profile of the murder suspect's ex-girlfriend. The ex-girlfriend had accepted a friend request from Melissa Bailey, the Independent's reporter on the story.]

That gave Bailey access to the ex-girlfriend's status updates and she discovered the suspect was involved in a police investigation years before. It also left Bailey and

In our shop, we had clear rules: It was fair game if you could access their page without being their friend.

Mike Orren



Bass in an ethical conundrum about what information to publish and how to maintain the ex-girlfriend's privacy. In the end, they waited on reporting some facts.

Bailey wrote up her perspective in Slate. You can read it at: <http://slate.me/nhi-bailey>.

Andrew Huff, Gapers Block
'Disinformation' can still seep in

Verifying whether something is news, is true, is typically fairly easy, or it's not high-stakes enough. You know, whether the Chicago Transit Authority train is stuck somewhere on the tracks. I'm not going to call the CTA to check on that. If somebody has said that, the stakes are so low in that being untrue, why would somebody bother to lie? But it's also something we may want to report — at rush hour it might be helpful for people. The beauty of the web is you can post an update if things change.

Even when you verify things, you can end up getting disinformation. There was a case recently where a

well-loved bar owner was believed to have died. It had come through a reliable news source. Somebody called the bar to verify if it was true, and the manager on duty said it wasn't. Two days later it turned out she was just covering for the family because they didn't want the news out yet.

Tom Warhaver, Columbia Missourian
Trust but verify

On many occasions, our social-media monitoring has produced stories. And there have also been at least three or four occasions in which we waited to good effect. A television station here tweeted that there was a shooting at a nuclear reactor on campus. They tweeted. Our instant reaction was to put it up, to tweet it on our site, put up a news burst. But the city editor — one of our editor/professor types — said wait, let's confirm it. Turned out there was a shooting in the neighborhood, but it had nothing to do with the nuclear site. That's our trust-but-verify approach. ■

**Even when you
verify things, you
can end up getting
disinformation.**

—Andrew Huff

CHAPTER 5

COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTIONS

Key Takeaways:

- *Volunteer contributions from members of a local community allow small news sites to widen and deepen coverage in non-traditional ways.*
- *Clearly label the source of community-contributed content.*
- *Be transparent about contributors' backgrounds and surface any potential conflict of interest.*

Mike Orren, Pegasus News
Sometimes trade-offs are necessary to cover a story

We took the tack all along that it was better to have somebody with a stake in an issue, even if it's one that might bias them, covering it, than to not have coverage at all. Particularly with a small team.

One of our more extreme examples was at one point we had a suburban city council being covered by one of the council members. And I know a lot of people at journalism schools hear that, I can see the heads starting to explode. But our take was, we're never going to be able to afford to send somebody to Keller, Texas, to cover that meeting. At the very least we have some confidence that he's going to get right what was voted upon and how it turned out. We've got open comments for people to tell us if he's spinning it. And it was great. Occasionally, one of his fellow councilmen would come on and say, "Well, Jim, I understood that was your take on how that went, but I felt differently about it." It created a good conversation. And we were very clear about disclosing it.

There might've occasionally been a comment posted saying, how can you call this an objective account? We would respond: we agree it would be better if we had an unbiased source there, but we don't, and we'd rather provide you this than nothing.

We have user media all over the site, but everything is curated. One of our editors just has all of our content partners in Google Reader. And he goes through it multiple times a day and selects the items he think are worth picking up. So we're only picking up maybe one out of every six or seven things they may be posting, and that ensures a certain quality level. Early on we tried, if there was something we were unsure about, to do the research and legwork on it. And we came to the conclusion that, unless it was something huge, it just wasn't worth the time and effort. If you have a one percent doubt in your mind if you should publish an item, just skip it.

David Boraks, Davidson News
Broadening your voices can lead to new audiences

People have pretty strong opinions about what should be in here and what shouldn't, and they send me things. From the standpoint of a traditional journalist who's used to working as somebody who comes in from the outside, gathers information, then writes it so that other people can know about it, it's been interesting to adjust to that.

A site like this needs to be a news website and to have journalistic standards. But it also is a community bulletin board. I get a lot of contributions, some fall into the category of press releases and announcements, some are articles, photographs.

I try very hard to figure out ways to get as much of this stuff on the site as possible.

I've had a couple of success stories. One of them is an 80-year-old woman who always wanted to write and had done some writing. It was OK, usable, and it was a different audience than I can get at myself as somebody in his 50s. So I came up with a new place on the site to post her column once a week. It's been a moderate success. It gets another voice and face out there that's not me.

Kat Powers, Wicked Local
Finding the right sources and linking away

We have some communities, like my beloved Somerville, Mass., where people are on their own websites posting their own news. And these are folks who are covering things with an expertise and sometimes resources that we just don't have. I'm never going to have a master's of education degree, but these folks have backgrounds in business, education, city planning, and it's a real resource for our readers to have that.

I want to take advantage of what they're doing, so we set up partnerships. With permission, we scrape their headlines, they appear on our site, and you can click through to their site. These folks are happy for us to do it. And since they know the headline is going to appear on our site, sometimes they tone it down. So instead of "We think the school system is corrupt" it's more like "Superintendent is questioned."

That has been a really elegant solution to these folks setting up their own sites. We're slightly more established and experienced at producing the news and getting it out to people, but there are experts out there who are lifetimes ahead of me in knowing their subjects.

We also have less controversial community content. In Somerville we have a community member who feels it's her civic duty to make sure that the local paper has schools covered, so she takes photos, she interviews kids and teachers. It's a great way to get schools coverage of interesting things, like the Hiroshima survivor who comes to speak to the classroom.

There is no way in a city of 86,000 that I'm gonna have the resources to cover that, but it's fascinating.

Liz George, Baristanet
Verify as if it's your own content

There was an instance where somebody wrote us a really detailed description of an accident, a hit-and-run, a kid got hurt. It was very descriptive and detailed and it sounded very good, like a good citizen report. And I remember the gal who was editing that day said, should I run this? And I said, you can't run it — I don't know if it's true! We've got to call and really check this out.

Sometimes if you get three or four reports of something, not specific like this, but let's say, three or four reports like, "the power is out on my street," three different people email you, then I'm fully comfortable going ahead and saying, "there are power outages," putting it out there and saying, "what have you heard?" Or, "we've heard that there was an accident, three different people have tipped us, we're trying to get more information." I'm comfortable with crowdsourcing stuff. But I wasn't comfortable with this. And it turned out he had a lot of the details wrong. He thought it was a girl, it was a boy; he thought it was a hit-and-run, it wasn't.

The best scenario is, you send somebody over to check it out. But sometimes it's after the fact. Then you're weighing information that comes in with what you can get officially. Sometimes it's a photo, that's great. Though I guess someone could doctor a photo. Still, it's a little easier to use a photo as a starting block to something.

Scott Lewis, Voice of San Diego
Clearly disclose community-generated content

We have a community bloggers platform, we call it the People's Post. We get user-generated content in that form. I don't think we make any money off of it — it's more of a service to let them get their voice out.

There's a copyediting process, similar to what we do with comments. We let most go through unless

they're attacks or insults or accusations. When they are, we check with them and edit it harder. But we haven't had too many issues. Most of the people blogging on that platform are pretty professional.

If you have a one percent doubt in your mind if you should publish an item, just skip it.

—Mike Orren

They like it, they get it in the stream of our search engine and such. Some of them have been some of our best-read pieces. We also put a disclosure next to it: it's not our opinion, it's theirs.

You can put anything you want up so easily on all these platforms — Twitter, Facebook, WordPress, they're all basically free and easy to use. So I feel, if we're going to put anything up on our platform, we might as well try to take it up to the bare minimum of standards, to make sure we're offering something distinctive.

**Barry Parr, Coastsider
Being okay with missing a great photo**

Toward the end of last year, somebody sent me a photo. Someone had been cutting the ends off of beer cans and managing to get them around the necks of seagulls. I got a photo of this from someone, saying, I found this gull on the beach with this can around its neck! And it looked Photoshopped to me. I sent it to my wife, who's a serious amateur photographer, and she showed it to some folks she knew, and the consensus opinion was, the thing had been Photoshopped on there. So I sent back a note saying I can't run this unless you can verify it for me. I made an enemy because she believes I was essentially accusing her of being dishonest. It got pretty ugly. She basically wanted the names of everybody who'd seen the photo — and she wanted it erased from my computer and that of everyone else who'd seen it.

I missed a great photo, unfortunately, because I was too careful about running something I couldn't verify. If you Google "seagull beer can," here it is on MSNBC.

I got an attorney's letter from her telling me to remove the image and apologize. She also wanted me to reveal the name of the person I'd given it to. If it hadn't been my wife and she wasn't OK with it,

I wouldn't have done it. But I wasn't interested in dealing with a lawsuit, and this was not a principle worth fighting over with this person.

**Andrew Chavez, the109/Schieffer
School of Journalism
Serving the community**

We look at areas where we can do things with Drupal views and some quick geocoding that just improves what's out there by a thousand percent.

Right now we have a guy who has a bunch of historic photos of the area, and they're sitting on a flat HTML page, buried in these links with captions that are saved as images. It looks like it might've been laid out in Quark, or something like that. We can go through, geocode those photos, and make an interactive map with before and afters in Google Street View in, like, a week. And that's a huge service to the community in our mind — just providing a platform for what's already out there.

**Lance Knobel, Berkeleyside
How to be transparent about conflicts**

I think as we and other sites reach out more and more to try and engage the community, for it not to be a little staff that does all the work, you actually want to mobilize dozens or hundreds of local people to do writing. Then there's a host of questions there about how you remain transparent about people's conflicts, how you actually retain credibility and authority. Within the narrow context of Berkeley, we've seen how easy it is for a newspaper or journalism source to be pegged as a totally partisan organ. Then half the people in town think of course it's right, and half the people think, I won't believe anything it says. If you're bringing in lots of people — which we haven't done yet — there's something to wrestle with there.

Way back, we had a woman write a piece for us about the downtown plan, and we had commenters come in and accuse her of writing this because her husband is a developer, so she's trying to promote the idea that the downtown needs to be restructured because then he'll make a lot of money on his buildings. ■

COMMENTS AND ANONYMITY

Key Takeaways:

- *The majority of sites we talked to try to enforce a policy requiring commenters to use their real names.*
- *Many sites moderate all comments, reviewing them before they're published. This takes lots of time and inhibits direct conversation, but protects discussions from shills, trolls, spammers and, potentially, libel suits.*
- *A few sites believe commenters have a right to anonymity, understanding that allowing anonymous comments demands extra vigilance in monitoring them.*

Howard Owens, the Batavian A real-time policy provides context and clarity

We have a real-name policy. To me that's an ethical issue online. If you have people commenting in a public forum, especially in a small community, readers have a right to know whether that's a former elected official or somebody who works for the state senator, or just a bitter businessman that got screwed over. Who a person is can give their comments clarity, meaning and context. So to me that's an ethical issues. It's more than having a civil place to have a community conversation — though a real-name policy helps with that, too. It always surprises me when journalists who I consider ethical and knowledgeable in this space disagree with me on that point.

Our real-name policy is enforced with at least 90 percent accuracy. There've been two or three times when it comes to my attention that longtime commenters aren't using their real names.

There are sites that are at a scale where the way I enforce a real-names policy might not work, but certainly in a small town I think it works. In a medium town it can work — I hear Buffalo's doing it. I'm not against anonymous online commentary or blogs — I believe that you can establish credibility anonymously. I'm just talking in the narrow context of participating in a news site that is an attempt to be a journalistic endeavor.

We have a "submit news" button — you can submit news or story tips anonymously, without identifying yourself. About half of the news tips I get are from people that send me their name, they just don't want it public. I find those tips to be a bit more credible.

David Boraks, Davidson News Worry about site reputation, not page views

I moderate all comments and make everybody identify themselves by name. I treat comments more like letters to the editor. I don't allow the free-for-all.

For several reasons. One is self-preservation — you know what the free-for-all looks like: any newspaper website. It's acutely obvious and painful in a small community like this if the free-for-all is allowed to go unchecked. It takes over your site, and people begin to think that is what your site is all about, it's a place to go grouse anonymously about whatever you want, to make unfounded accusations, to publish false information, to libel and slander.

The reason why I do it the way I do it now is, we had a couple of incidents where comments were posted on the site that created problems for me. This is my

I refuse to play the game other sites do, which is, all content is content, comments are content too, and if it gets page views, that's good.

—David Boraks

In one case, one of the candidates for mayor in the election of 2007 posted some information in a comment about the town board and the other candidate for mayor. Basically, it was accusations without any foundation. I disallowed it, and after four or five of those I told him he needed to stop. I ended up banning him from the site. It was really ugly — I had to ban him from commenting in the midst of the campaign. He ended up writing a column for the *Charlotte Observer* after he lost the election in which he accused DavidsonNews.net of taking sides in the election and being responsible for his loss.

The other thing that caused me to change my policy was, a person had posted something on the site about another business person. It was dangerous stuff. And I realized, if people are going to post this kind of thing on my site, I have to moderate — because some people saw it before I had a chance to remove it.

I refuse to play the game some other sites do, which is that, all content is content, comments are content

business. I started it, my blood sweat and tears have gone into it. I'm creating it for the community. I see a responsibility to the community to keep it going, and if a comment is posted on the site that jeopardizes that, I don't feel I'm under any obligation to publish it.

too, and if it gets page views, that's good. You know what? People like me need to worry more about the reputation of our site than how many page views we have.

**Scott Lewis, Voice of San Diego
Registering users led to healthier conversations**

We instituted last year a policy that you have to disclose your full name to comment. We didn't have most of our content available for commenting for a long time. We opened it all up but we pre-review and copy-edit all comments, and we decided to do this no-anonymity thing. And so when a person registers on the site to comment we send them a note to make sure their contact info works, and if there's any question we also call them and try to do that. Some readers have a lot of trouble with it. But now we're starting to get a level of commenting that I'm more proud of. I think it's a healthier, cleaner discussion. We now have 3,675 registered users through that process.

You know what? People like me need to worry more about the reputation of our site than how many page views we have.

—David Boraks

So that's been interesting. We also have a pretty heavy moderating effort, where any kind of accusations or ad hominem attacks we try to cull out. Every once in a while somebody blows up and accuses us of censorship. But this is our forum, we're trying to make it productive.

**Tracy Record, West Seattle Blog
Real names are not the problem**

When it started in 2005, our whole site was anonymous because we didn't know we would wind up doing what we did. We were chronically anonymous on the Internet before that. We first got online in 1994 and were cognizant that there could be a trail of what you say or what you do. It just didn't seem right that if we went around using our own names that people could find, for example, me discussing my pregnancy on misc.kids.pregnancy on Usenet back in 1995. So we were always using initials or things like that.

Then I thought: gee, I'd love to talk about West Seattle online and ramble about our neighborhood. So I didn't think twice [about staying anonymous]. We started West Seattle Blog as just: hey, I'm this person out here, talking about whatever I see in the neighborhood.

After the first year, we started to cover some news. At that point, it was almost like we really could be, in the best way for a journalist, something

We learned fairly early on that if you go trying to explain why you deleted something, you wind up just tying yourself in knots.



Tracy Record

of a fly on the wall. I remember the first time I went to cover a meeting in this tiny room in a restaurant, and I was sitting three feet from the person who was the ringleader of a local protest. Nobody knew I was the person running the local website.

Aside from a few events we were able to go to or observe, we did everything by email. It would've made a great academic study. By then our site was starting to develop a small following, and people apparently could tell that

we were responsible, we were accurate, we spelled things correctly. We even got people to talk with us by email who were in official capacities. A local politician's staff communicated with us, even though they only knew us as the West Seattle Blog people, because they trusted us. Not that they were telling us anything confidential, but if you wrote to them with a question about something that was in their jurisdiction, they'd answer, which was really amazing.

On the other hand there was also a wonderful woman — who since then has become somebody we work with — who, the first time we sent her a question, said, "Sorry, nothing personal, but I'm a longtime journalist and I won't speak with anyone when I don't know who they are, where they're coming from, or what their track record is."

Later in 2007, we thought we need to get serious about this, and there was no question that we would have to say, "OK, here's who we are."

I still strongly believe that people have the right to comment online and in person whether they choose to give their names or not. I've noticed that even in contexts where people are supposedly all sitting there with their own true names, like on Facebook, it doesn't stop people from being acrimonious, it doesn't stop them from getting into flame wars. Real names are not the problem.

I also highly resent the fact that people are implying that we should all have to give proof of our identity online, yet I can walk into a public meeting tomorrow, and someone can request that I identify myself before I stand up and speak, but they can't require me to, and I can stand up there and say something. People should have that same right online.

On our site, we don't require real names. My strong belief about that is it's all about the rules that you set, the atmosphere that you set. And not only having rules but enforcing them. And inviting people to tell you if someone is breaking the rules. We have a forum, for example, that I don't spend my whole day watching. So we say, please let us know if someone is violating the rules, whether it's a civility rule or a different kind of rule, like no free advertising.

If humanly possible it's really important to keep an eye on comments. Search engines tend to pick up comments as if they were content on their own, and if you have something there that's an out-and-out falsehood, no matter how big or small or dangerous, it'll be there in the record, somebody will come across it, cite it somewhere. So if you have some way to truthsquad, and luckily we do, then I think that should be part of the policy.

If it's something you have no way of verifying, and you think that if it turns out not to be true it could be damaging, you can delete it. But sometimes you can easily verify it yourself.

Now we're starting to get a level of commenting that I'm more proud of. I think it's a healthier, cleaner discussion.



Scott Lewis

We had an example this morning. We had a fairly long comment today about a guy who bought an old firetruck, put it on his lawn, and now the city says that it's breaking the rules and it has to go. It got about 150 comments the first couple of days; it's about a week old now. This morning I noticed a commenter said, "I want you all to know the firetruck is gone now." I had just seen it yesterday, so I posted a comment quickly to say, "Well, if that's true, it's been since yesterday afternoon when we saw it — we'll go over and check."

My husband was dropping our child off at school, he went over to check, verified the truck was still there. In the meantime the firetruck's owner had already posted saying, "it's still there." So I then noted in my response that thanks for that comment, I'm deleting the other one, we don't take kindly to people posting falsehoods.

I don't usually comment on whether a comment has been deleted, or anything like that. We learned fairly early on that if you go trying to explain why you deleted something, you wind up just tying yourself in knots. No matter how many policies you have, there's always something that skirts the line or doesn't fall into a clear category, and then someone will just come back around and use your words against you.

Barry Parr, Coastsider
The actions of some changed the rules for all

Because we had some early incidents, and just a lot of nonsense from anonymous posters, there are now no anonymous posters on Coastsider. Everybody there registers with their own real name. We're fairly loose about verifying names, we're essentially trusting people to be honest, and we haven't had any problems.

Part of this is about that idea of creating community, and everyone can participate and know who they're

talking to. When I go downtown in Half Moon Bay I meet people I know. I want Coastsider to feel that way as well. And again, that was one of the reasons I went away from allowing anonymous comments.

Kat Powers, Wicked Local
Anonymous phone comment lines led the way

We do not require correct names, but we do require an email address. I can look and find your IP address in the back end of my system. So I will occasionally email a person and say: you know, listen, I know you sit at your desk in the town of so and so and you're making these comments, but you need to stop, because I will ban you, and if I ban you then I ban everybody around you, and people are going to want to know why the town of so-and-so can't log in to my site any more, and then I'm going to have to tell them. Sometimes that's enough to make people behave.

Our community has had anonymous phone speakouts for more than 20 years, and there's a page in our paper where we're literally transcribing phone calls of people talking about everything from kids' haircuts to the plowing job that the mayor supervised. We edit it. You can't go in there and start talking about somebody's sex life. But we do have this anonymous forum, and it was good practice for dealing with commenters.

Mike Orren, Pegasus News
Using common sense

If somebody posted a comment saying "Joe's Restaurant is the best in the world! I had the best experience ever!" and we can see that the user's registration email is like chefjoe@joesrestaurant.com, we would not give up their personal information — but we would publicly call them out. We would say, "We're not saying Joe's Restaurant isn't awesome, but the email address of that user would indicate to us that they are an inordinate fan of Chef Joe."

Or if a bunch of commenters suddenly pop up on a certain issue or story and they all have the same IP address, we would never give up their IP address, but we would say, “They could all be different people logging in at the library, but you need to know that the last seven comments all came from the same IP address, which means it’s likely, though not certain, that they’re all related.”

Paul Bass, New Haven Independent
Selling ads creates a false construct

We heavily censor and monitor comments before they’re printed. We don’t try to run up like a million comments, because people don’t read that anyway. It’s more we want everyone to feel comfortable being part of it. So we don’t print comments about racism, personal nastiness, factual allegations, libel. So the KKK people don’t get on. The comments on the other TV, print, paper websites are sort of like the sewer. They don’t want to spend the money [to moderate]. Also, they’re selling ads, eyeballs — it’s a real false construct, because it doesn’t have to do with engagement of readers.

Good comments come from good original reporting.

—Paul Bass

Whereas on our site, if someone gets killed in a poor neighborhood or something, that family is on there. You get this real diversity of conservative to liberal, black, white, brown, rich, poor, power, not power. We write a lot about school reform, a lot about police, controversies, layoffs, and the cops are all over it posting. I believe it’s because, first of all, there’s good reporting — good comments come from good original reporting. Posing issues in the proper way. And then heavy monitoring — we’re religious about that.

Andrew Huff, Gaper’s Block
Legal threats led to a practical change

We take a pretty light approach to moderation. If somebody’s being egregiously abusive, we’ll unpublish their comment. But you really have to do a lot to get your comment taken down on Gaper’s Block. It

has happened a couple of times. And we’ve had to ban a couple of IPs based on their inability to follow community norms.

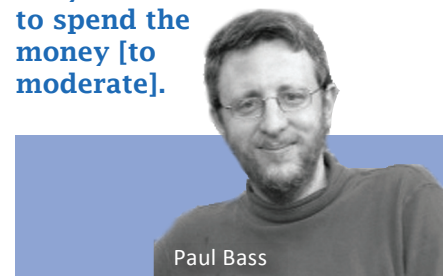
In another situation, where we faced a libel-suit threat, there were comments that were inflammatory, that painted an inaccurate picture of one of the people involved in the story. Rather than take down the original comments, we allowed the person who was being defamed to make a statement, and added that to the story, just to try to fix that. That was a case of Google causing our story to rise to the top for searches on the name.

Just the threat of legal action is enough to cause us to move. We wouldn’t be able to afford to respond.

Donald Heider, Loyola School of Communications:
Transparency above all

I’m not a big fan of anonymity. One of the principles we outline in our “Ethics for Bloggers” document is transparency. What comes along with using your name is the sense that you’re responsible for what you say. There are certainly moments at which anonymity is necessary in journalism, with sources. But those are really rare. You can set up criteria on which you would cross that threshold, but I think you have to set that bar very high.

The comments on the other TV, print, paper websites are sort of like the sewer. They don’t want to spend the money [to moderate].



Paul Bass

In most instances, knowing who’s speaking is a really helpful thing. Having properly sourced stories, having people identify themselves in comment sections, is definitely my strong preference. It helps with situations of abuse, of people being misleading. So my advice to local news providers is, try to be transparent, try to require user’s names. ■

BUSINESS AND ADVERTISING

Key Takeaway:

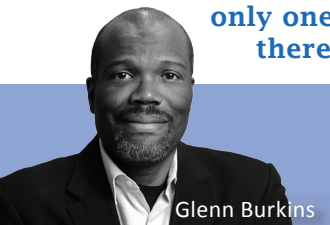
- *Separate editorial and business roles where you can — but accept that it's sometimes impossible in smaller shops.*
- *Be forthright with advertisers and funders about exactly what they're buying.*
- *Identify advertisers when you write about them or topics that relate to their business.*
- *Tell readers about any line-blurrings that make you think twice.*

Glenn Burkins, Qcitymetro The battle of independence vs. revenue

Most of my discomfort has been around money. The arts and science council here is my biggest advertiser. When they call me up, just like they do every other reporter and say, “Hey, we’re going to have a press conference, can you come out?” I’m fully aware that I’ve got a yearlong contract with them that goes a long way toward underpinning my site.

When you are the journalist as well as the ad sales person, it adds a layer of discomfort. It’s tough when you’re so close to the people who are also putting the money in your pocket. Of course I have people all the time who, in exchange for an ad, want a story. And we have to explain to them in a very polite way without scuttling the deal that those are two different conversations. We’re not going to forfeit our credibility or our independence for a few hundred dollars.

When you are the publisher as well as the editor, it’s a little harder. You start looking around for someone to blame, and you’re the only one there.



Glenn Burkins

The difference is that with a bigger organization, you can

always blame the other guy: “Those bastards in the newsroom — I can’t tell them what to do!” When you are the publisher as well as the editor, it’s a little harder. You start looking around for someone to blame, and you’re the only one standing there.

A year ago, I had some political ads on my site. One was from a mayoral candidate. The Republican bought ad space on my site, the Democrat didn’t. Every time I sat down to write about that campaign, I knew in the back of my mind that one candidate had given me money and the other one hadn’t. And I didn’t like that at all. I can honestly say that I didn’t do anything different because of that. But out in the community I heard speculation that I was favoring the Republican. I heard from people who were working with the Democrat that their candidate wasn’t getting a fair shake because they didn’t have ads on my site.

David Boraks, Davidson News I’m no longer just a journalist, I’m a business owner

I do not believe in what we sometimes call pay for play. One of the reasons I don’t work at big dailies any more is that I had been asked by a paper’s editor

to write about advertisers, and I just got tired of that. So it can happen at those levels.

We write about advertisers on our site. It's inevitable in a small community. I try to make sure that I write about all the businesses here, not just the ones that advertise with me. Anybody that wants to can make a claim that I wrote such and such an article because somebody was an advertiser. I need to make sure I have the ammunition to be able to say, that's not really fair, here's why.

I'm beginning to understand that I'm no longer just a journalist, I'm a business owner. I'm trying to keep the two sides separate, and there's a constant tug of war there.

—David Boraks

I work very hard to train the ad sales people. When they first come, in I give them my spiel, and I'm a little bit of a Nazi about it, I'm afraid. But they need to understand that there really can't be any quid pro quos or understandings that buying an ad on our site equals some kind of coverage.

Practically speaking, when I go out in the community, people know I'm the publisher, and I interact regularly with fellow business owners. I just make sure people understand: if they want an ad they need to talk to these people over there — I don't have anything to do with it.

At the [Block by Block] conference in Chicago, Howard Owens said that you have to think of the small businesses in town as your clients, your constituency, as well as your readers. Hearing him explain that made a huge difference to me. I'm beginning to understand that I'm no longer just a journalist, I'm a business owner. I'm trying to keep the two sides separate, and there's a constant tug of war there.

The only way this is going to succeed is if the journalists have a very strong sense of journalistic ethics but they're also willing to open their minds a little bit to running a business. I don't think the two are mutually exclusive. It requires vigilance.

Howard Owens, The Batavian Advertisers are also community members

To me, the main thing is, protect your audience — that's where the money is. Take care of your audience and the advertising will follow. And in a small community like this, a lot of my readers are also advertisers.

There's one business in town we've done a lot of investigative stuff on, and they'll never advertise with me. But the stories had to be told. The out-of-town owner eventually had their ad agency call me up and inquire about advertising. Their thinking was, if our competitors are advertising on the site, we should be too. I said, "Look, I want to be clear, just because you're buying an ad, this story isn't over — I'm not dropping it." She still went ahead and set up the appointment, and then didn't keep it. I never heard from her again. So maybe I scared 'em off.

One thing I will say is if an advertiser wants some little puff piece, I don't have a problem with that. I know some purist journalist types would see this as soiling themselves. My advertisers are part of the community. If they do something good, even if it is a little puffery, they deserve some recognition. Non-advertisers, frankly, have a higher barrier to cross. I'll go out of the way a little more for somebody who puts money in my mouth — that's just the way it is.

My advertisers are part of the community. If they do something good, even if it is a little puffery, they deserve some recognition. Non-advertisers, frankly, have a higher barrier to cross.

Howard Owens



Liz George, Baristanet Finding other ways to connect with businesses

What we are up against is how many people will call you out on perceived breaches of the line between editorial and advertising. Sometimes we'll write about somebody, a bad restaurant review, and commenters will say, 'Oh wow, I guess they didn't adver-

tise with you!’ And the funny thing is, the person did advertise with us. But nobody’s sitting there keeping track. The ads move around. You refresh the page and different ads appear. And you can’t win. If you give a good review, they’ll say, ‘Oh, are they going to buy an ad next week?’

You’re not going to ignore the story because the person’s your advertiser, if it’s something the community should know about, or is of interest. But you’re not going to shill for your advertiser. That’s the decision you make all the time editorially: When is it story-worthy and when is it crossing the line?

We do a post, periodically, less frequently than monthly at this point, that we call “And Now a Word from our Sponsors.” If there are things about businesses that have supported us that we think are of interest to our readers, but we want to say clearly that these are people who advertise with us, we’ll combine them in a post. We have a special logo for it.

The other way to handle it, too, is if people ask us for a lot of favors, even people who don’t advertise with us, we’ll tweet and Facebook things that we might not write about editorially. We’ll become friends with them on Facebook, we do other things to connect and support the businesses. But the more successful we get, the more it seems everybody wants something. We have a self-serve calendar, and occasionally we’ll say to someone, look, you can’t post a yoga class that you’re charging for that’s repeated every week — that’s not the same as an event!

Scott Lewis, Voice of San Diego
We’re transparent about where our revenue comes from

I always assumed when I was a reporter there was this clear line. But when you look at it more realistically, the line is hardly clear. An alt weekly will do a sex issue or something like that — they do that for their advertisers. They’re obviously performing a

The other way to handle it, too, we’ll tweet and Facebook things that we might not write about editorially.

—Liz George

service for a certain type of funder. So is it OK for a grant maker to help you come up with a new focus of your content? When does it cross the line? When it comes down to an actual story? We’ve had to wrestle with that.

It’s never as easy as some donor calling up and saying, “Back off this story!” Let’s say a funder is upset with a story — a major donor. Often, the complaint is not about the bias of the story, or the angle. It has to do with accuracy. That’s a very powerful technique to get at us, and one that I hadn’t imagined having to parry from someone who funded us. And yet true and false, and correct and incorrect, isn’t always that clear. So that brings up some interesting discussions. Are we going to look into this as an accuracy issue just because it’s a donor? Do they have a good point? Or are we actually *not* looking into it because they’re a funder — so we actually punish the funder.

How *do* you handle that? We’ve decided to treat it like we would any other complaint about our accuracy. In six years we’ve only had four or five issues where a funder has gotten involved this way, and we’ve always been proud of how it turns out.

We’re transparent about where our revenue comes from. We’ll even highlight people if they have a tangential relationship to our content or our funding if they’re mentioned. That invites consequences. People use it to draw conclusions about why you wrote something this way instead of that way. You’ve got to just let your credibility stand for itself.

The chief of police in San Diego has a lawyer, and he objected to part of a Fact Check feature that we ran. The police chief had

You’re not going to ignore the story because the person’s your advertiser, if it’s something the community should know about, or is of interest. But you’re not going to shill for your advertiser.



Liz George

claimed that if a tax hike failed, then the police would be required to start responding to calls by phone rather than with a car. We pointed out that that's actually what's happened already for thousands of cases, and that his statement was false. Among all the fact checks we've done it was one of the cleaner ones! But this lawyer was pretty upset. He figured out we had a sponsor for the fact check, and this sponsor had signed on to a campaign against the tax hike that the police chief was talking about, and he charged that's the reason we did the fact check.

Tracy Record, West Seattle Blog
Mention advertisers in every instance

When I worked in TV, I probably wrote about advertisers or did stories about them over the years and had no way of knowing whether that company was an advertiser. At West Seattle Blog we decided, when we started selling ads three years ago, every time we mention an advertiser in any context — whether it was good, bad, event calendar, news story, whatever — we would identify them with a little parenthetical phrase that says “WSB sponsor.” And if you ever want to know who our sponsors are, you can look at one page on the site, identified in the tabs, that always has the current list of sponsors.

In big media there might be some pressure because, if you put an advertiser in a bad light, and they make a stink about it, you might be talking about a five or even a six-figure advertising contract. In our case, we don't have an ad that runs more than several hundred dollars. And frankly, if I had to write something that wasn't favorable about sponsor X, and they chose to pull their ads, wow, OK! I don't really want them in the fold anyway.

Andrew Chavez, the109/Schieffer School of Journalism:
Covering stories and handing out business cards

Since we're not a legacy product, we're trying to grow audience while simultaneously trying to cover

the community. And with a small staff, that audience-building component is often part of their job along with the news-gathering component. There simply aren't the resources at a site this size to devote separate people to all of those tasks and still cover the community at the depth necessary to pull this off.

So our community manager, for example, goes out and visits its neighborhood association meetings to talk about the site and to see what's going on out in the neighborhood. But at

some point she might be in a position to write a news story off of what she's learned in that meeting. So she may walk in handing out business cards and giving a little talk about what the site is and telling people to sign up for our newsletter and all of that, and by the end of the meeting she may end up taking notes and having to pass that information along to a reporter — or even in some instances put together a short little story about what happened in the meeting.

Mike Orren, Pegasus News
We sometimes cross the line but are always transparent

There's a single phrase we used on a lot of material that we felt cured a lot: we'd say, “Our friends and advertisers at *blank* want you to know this.” For instance, we would only allow advertisers to run contests on our site blog. And every one of those entries starts with “our friends and advertisers at the Granada Theater are offering two free tickets to such and such a show.”

It was even more of a straddle in early days before we had a full-time sales staff. There was one case where I went to visit a new retailer in town. They were doing something very interesting and innovative, but we were there to talk about advertising.

So is it OK for a grant maker to help you come up with a new focus of your content? When does it cross the line? When it comes down to an actual story? We've had to wrestle with that.

—Scott Lewis

True and false, and correct and incorrect, isn't always that clear.

—Scott Lewis

And they wound up running a small campaign with us. I came back to the site and wrote about what they were doing. But I included in the post story note, “I learned about this while we were there to talk with them about advertising. I would have said the same thing whether they advertised or not. And if you disagree with anything that I’ve said, the comments are open below.”

So we would certainly sometimes cross lines, but always being super-transparent about it. The way we always coached our folks was, don’t worry about how it looks; just be fair. So it may look bad that I was on a sales call and learned something and decided to write about them. But I’d rather do that than not cover it and somehow penalize both us and a prospective customer.

Lance Knobel, Berkeleyside
Out in the community but conscious of the division

The other day the news broke that the Claremont property [a grand old Berkeley resort] was being put into bankruptcy. We wrote that unhesitatingly even though I know [our salesperson] is talking to the Claremont, trying to get them to advertise.

We’re conscious of the state-and-church issue. The only person who’s currently being paid by Berkeleyside other than tiny amounts is our advertising person. Our three editors are not going out and saying, as part of our work, you must advertise on Berkeleyside. Of course, when we do see people, I don’t think any of us feel any compunction — particularly if it’s not during an interview — to say, “gosh, you should think about advertising on Berkeleyside.”

So it’s a murky line, unquestionably. I don’t know that this is new. If you were running something like, say, the Truckee News, I would suspect 30 years ago the editor there knew every single store owner in town and saw them at the Rotary Club.

Paul Bass, New Haven Independent

We haven’t had any real problems with the money. After 30 years here in New Haven, I have a pretty good idea who not to ask. We tend to not ask people who want to control what you write.

Steve Buttry, Journal Register Company
Appearances matter

Transparency is not an inoculation, not by any stretch. But failure to disclose always puts you in a bad position when something comes out.

One of the best things I ever heard on this topic came from Michael Gartner when I worked at the Des Moines Register in the 1980s. Michael was company president at that point, in charge of the business, but he’s got long news-side roots. At an employee meeting, somebody in ad sales wanted everyone to know how much a particular story had hurt sales efforts. I’ll always remember Michael’s response to this. He said, “Let’s be clear: All you are selling is access to an audience that trusts us. And if they don’t trust us, you’ve got nothing to sell.” That’s true whatever the size of the organization.

I try to make sure that I write about all the businesses here, not just the ones that advertise with me.

—David Boraks

So you need to think, OK, are we doing something here that in actuality or appearance is going to damage that trust? And if so, what do we need to do? Sometimes it’s going to be an effort at transparency. Sometimes it’s going to be being explicit with the advertiser about what they’re buying and what they’re not buying.

When it’s a one-person shop, you have to handle that conversation — to say, OK, I’m just selling you an ad, that’s all you get. When I do the story it’s got to be independent of the ad, because I’m out of business if people don’t trust me. And in a small town, they know that’s true. ■

GIFTS AND FREEBIES

Key Takeaways:

- *Local news sites generally look askance at accepting anything more valuable than a cup of coffee.*
- *Like many larger news organizations, they do often accept free tickets to entertainment events for review purposes.*

Tracy Record, West Seattle Blog

Be prepared to explain it

We won't take freebies. We have to keep reminding people of the lines. Because I'm a traditionalist, it's not hard for me, but it's hard sometimes to make them understand. People sometimes bristle about it a bit if we come to cover the awards banquet or the annual fundraiser. Why won't you eat lunch with us? And I have to explain, unless I paid for this — and I don't feel like paying 50 bucks right now, like you guys all did — I'm not going to just take your free food. I'm a journalist, and we're not going to cross that ethics line. But thank you very much, maybe we'll drink a glass of water or a cup of tea — something that's not going to look like a conflict.

Kat Powers, Wicked Local

It sometimes means eating elsewhere

I've been dealing with that my whole career to the point where I had to stop going to one of my favorite restaurants. When they saw me, it was look, this is the girl who wrote about our liquor license, we should be nice to her! Here, have our lobster ravioli! And I have to say, you don't understand — I know your culture is, "I feed people, let's be friendly," but I'm coming from a culture of "Don't give me stuff, because it looks like I'm going to treat you differently" — and, frankly, I'm not going to treat you differently.

My personal line has always been, of course I'll accept a cup of coffee, because when you come into my newsroom I'll give you a cup of coffee, but that's about the end of it. And every time I have a new intern, even if it's a marketing intern, you are now being held

up to the same standard that I am. If you go write a story about the new gym, you are not allowed to accept a six-month membership.

Andrew Huff, Gaper's Block

The appeals can be blatant

We're bombarded with PR and marketing pitches, and often they include free products or free meals, and that gets into somewhat dicey ground. I got something just this week from a shoe manufacturer. It was blatant: we will send you free shoes if you write about us. We can put you in as part of our blog marketing program. They were basically trying to bribe us into writing about it. I've been trained as a journalist, but not everybody in the field has that background. I imagine that plenty of people took them up on that offer.

If you go write a story about the new gym, you are not allowed to accept a six-month membership.

—Kat Powers

With music and arts, covering theater, concerts, it's pretty much expected, as press, if we're going to review it, chances are we're getting a press pass. But in the case of a restaurant, occasionally they'll set up something where there's an invite to dine, a media dinner of some sort. In cases where we do take that offer up, our policy is to mention that.

We probably don't do as many restaurant reviews as we would like simply because we can't afford to pay for everybody's meals. It is a tradeoff, but there's plenty of news we can cover without taking that stuff. ■

ADVOCACY

Key Takeaways:

- *Some local news sites adhere to the tradition of journalistic impartiality and avoid advocating one side of public controversies.*
- *Others — probably the majority — embrace the alternative tradition of either representing a particular community point of view, promoting specific issues, even crusading for particular causes.*
- *In smaller organizations it's much harder to compartmentalize "news" and "opinion," or reporters and columnists — even if you want to.*

Paul Bass, New Haven Independent Let the people speak

Our readers do weigh in on the ethical issues really quick. We did a story about the police chief, went down to the police headquarters. The custodian had very strong opinions, and we put them in. We hadn't realized they were outsourcing the custodial work. She got fired.

We immediately wrote about it, pressed the city about it. I got the phone number for the boss who fired her, and I urged everyone to call him. She got her job back by the end of the day.

But people had this great debate on our site. Dan Kennedy wrote about it (bit.ly/iGDOnm), saying we were wrong. I think I was probably wrong.

Tracy Record, West Seattle Blog What to do when asked for advice

We get asked for advice. My husband might be sitting in the corner covering a community organization meeting and a person asking a question turns to him and says, "What would you guys advise us to do?"

It's one thing if they ask a question that's a fact. But if they want advice about something, we'll do our best to recuse ourselves — "Hey, it's really your decision to make." It's clear they feel that you're something different from that objective person sitting in the corner who parachuted in with a notebook. They feel more like you're there with them. It's very foreign to me because I was always sitting in an office in a newsroom downtown somewhere.

It requires a lot of explaining to people — where you choose to draw the lines, why you choose to draw them there.

I'm really old school. I've tried to be a little more removed because I feel it's right. We don't take editorial positions, for example, which I am led to believe is really rare in this neighborhood media world.

You can say that some degree of covering something a lot is advocacy. But we never say, "OK,

We get asked for advice. My husband might be sitting in the corner covering a community organization meeting and a person asking a question turns to him and says, "What would you guys advise us to do?"



Tracy Record

we're endorsing person X in race Y, or this particular position." Or, "we want you all to go down to the business district tomorrow and protest because it's outrageous that so and so is closing." I don't think that's our place.

I find it fascinating that a lot of people look at me like I'm a space alien when I say that. "Of course we're gonna take a position and tell you what we think should be done in our neighborhood! This is our neighborhood, dammit!"

Lance Knobel, Berkeleyside
Play an important civic role

Most of my career was in Europe. I spent years in London, so I'm very comfortable with the notion that an authoritative paper can have a clear point of view.

The Guardian news pages will approach a story about the Tory budget announcement in a different way from the Telegraph. There's an inherent bias there that the editors and reporters and I think the readers are comfortable with. Jay Rosen's work on "the view from nowhere" resonates very strongly for me. I'm very happy to be the view from somewhere.

I'm very happy to be the view from somewhere.

—Lance Knobel

We work very hard to be fair and to present all points of view. But I think there is a root presumption at Berkeleyside that change isn't necessarily bad, that economic activity is probably necessary and good. These may sound like motherhood and apple pie — but in Berkeley, this puts us very clearly in one camp!

And that's fine.

It's clear they feel that you're something different from that objective person sitting in the corner who parachuted in with a notebook. They feel more like you're there with them.

—Tracy Record

In the runup to the November election, we did pieces on each of the local propositions, and we didn't take a view — there wasn't a Berkeleyside editorial. We ran pieces presenting both sides of the argument, and people on both sides said that was very helpful and

useful. But there's no doubt in my mind that if you read Berkeleyside regularly you'll find that we don't think developers are necessarily evil. I don't think we need to engage in a struggle against having a bias towards a healthy business community in Berkeley.

I think there's a good tradition in journalism of newspapers being civic institutions and playing an important civic role. And in our own tiny, tiny way we would like to play that kind of positive role as well. If we can do anything to make Telegraph Avenue less crappy, I don't see that as abandoning our position above the fray. I see that as we've done something great for the city we live and work in.

Barry Parr, Coastsider
Taking strong positions

I've taken some very strong positions on some pretty polarizing topics. We did a lot of reporting around a bill called AB 1991. It's very complicated, but essentially it was a special bill that would allow the city of Half Moon Bay to suspend all environmental regulations on a particular parcel of land they'd been sued over. It was horrible, and I was pretty withering about it. There have been a couple of issues like that. Land use issues tend to be pretty polarizing anyway out here. Even just reporting on them generally without taking a position, it's a minefield.

Mike Orren, Pegasus News
When picking up after a dog becomes news

This bar was in a kind of downtrodden area, and it had actually done a lot to improve the neighborhood. So imagine this bar that's been there for five years, and a guy moves into the neighborhood and decides that he doesn't like that they make noise. He started going after them, calling the police, often with noise-ordinance claims. Every opportunity he got he would sit out on his porch with a little sound meter and wait for the decibel to go over, then record it and get the cops. It was a big controversy with our users.

He would post on our site frequently, saying it doesn't matter that I came afterwards or that they've done good things for the neighborhood, the law's the law. No matter what, you have to follow the law.

We got wind of the fact that this guy did not scoop after his dog. So we sent a staffer out and staked out his house until we got video of him not scooping after his dog.

This was one where our community was overwhelmingly behind us but there were a few people that didn't like us taking such an advocacy role. Most of our users were just thrilled.

He left the neighborhood shortly after that.

Andrew Huff, Gaper's Block
Taking our cues from the weekly

We follow more in the line of the alternative weekly. There are a ton of causes that we picked up, like advocating for farmer's markets and against food deserts. Our political editor's relatively pro-labor, and he's made it a goal to be as supportive as possible of Chicago public school teachers. Things along those lines. On the other hand, we go out of our way to avoid endorsing political candidates.

Glenn Burkins, Qcitymetro
Sometimes reporting and opining can mix

If we can do anything to make Telegraph Avenue less crappy, I don't see that as abandoning our position above the fray. I see that as we've done something great for the city we live and work in.

—Lance Knobel

Our school board recently voted to make Martin Luther King Day a snow makeup day. And the local NAACP called for a student boycott and an economic boycott against the city. They called Charlotte a racist bastion. I covered those stories, and then I did a column saying the Charlotte I know is not a racist bastion.

It occurred to me as I sat down to write that column,

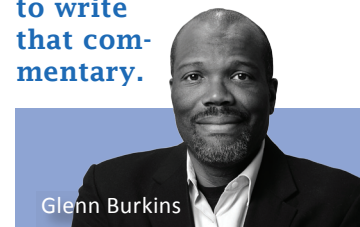
that that would not happen in a newspaper. If I were a reporter writing that story, I would not come back and opine. If I could afford to have a reporter go out and cover that story and then me as the editor do a commentary or whatever, that would be perfect. That's my dream, but until I get there, I'm not gonna beat myself up excessively over necessity. I needed to cover that story, and I felt I needed to write that commentary.

So in this way we are different [from a traditional news organization]. By necessity. We don't have the finances and resources to construct all the layers necessary to avoid that kind of conflict.

Steve Buttry, Journal Register Company
Issues of objectivity remain unsettled

"Opinion" and "objectivity" never appear in the SPJ Code of Ethics. It's always been OK for some journalists to have opinions and to express them. You know, we have columns. And there are alternative publications that are doing journalism in their own right that follow a different reporting standard in terms of voice and perspective. And blogging continues in that vein.

I'm not gonna beat myself up excessively over necessity. I needed to cover that story, and I felt I needed to write that commentary.



Glenn Burkins

First of all, the notion that somebody needs to be objective and completely detached is something that has never been settled. That's an issue that's always been with us. We're just seeing the latest wrinkles of it, and journalists are going to disagree about it.

I think part of this discussion needs to be: are there connections that go further than opinions? Because one of those key points in the SPJ code is to act independently. Most of the elaboration on that in the SPJ code is about independence with advertisers. I think that one of the big debates we need to have

is about this question of independence. Are there lines we need to watch and not cross while still allowing — and in my view encouraging — people do recognize that we are human, we do have judgment and perspective, and that can add value to our journalism if we use it correctly.

Tom Warhover, Columbia Missourian
Reframing the questions

A newspaper has always been, even when it doesn't admit it, a participant in the life of the community it serves. So the extent to which you not only admit that but embrace it makes your newspaper better, period. The question is not whether, but how — how do we become a better participant in our community?

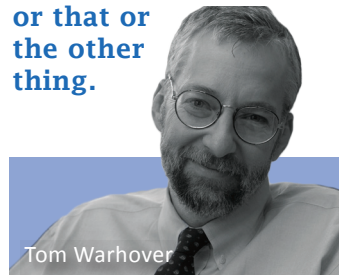
And so I've long ago passed that Rubicon. So the questions are more like, what does engagement mean? And how do we listen better? As opposed to advocacy. My role as an advocate is to advocate

for better democracy in my community. It is not to advocate for this or that or the other thing.

You know, I won't tell my wife how I voted, much less anyone else. I won't opine on virtually any specific issue, even at the coffee table at my favorite coffee shop. It's just ingrained in me.

That puts me in the very weird position of being in meetings where I sound like the old fart. So, no, I can't have a public life reporter, who covers city government, advocating for collective bargaining in Wisconsin. A young man wrote a column I spiked that did just that. We talked about it: what is your best role in this community, and is it as being an advocate for collective bargaining in Wisconsin, where his parents are public employees? ■

My role as an advocate is to advocate for better democracy in my community. It is not to advocate for this or that or the other thing.



Tom Warhover

CORRECTIONS AND REVISIONS

Key Takeaways:

- *When a story is edited post-publication, most sites make an effort to note the change.*
- *Site editors place errors into three rough categories (though these distinctions can be hard to draw):*
 - *Major substantive errors, misquotations and factual mistakes are fixed in the story and noted in a correction notice.*
 - *Minor errors are often corrected via strikethrough.*
 - *Trivial typos are usually corrected without notice.*
- *Some sites are beginning to provide Wikipedia-style “history” or “revisions” features that let readers track all changes made to a story after its initial publication.*
- *Most sites won’t take down a whole story or post after it’s published except in the rarest of circumstances, and any such “unpublishing” calls for an explanation to readers.*

Liz George, Baristanet
Commenters find corrections

There’s an understanding that we’re getting them the story as it happens in some cases, and it may change.

Typically the people who find the corrections are the commenters. They’re very good that way, they’re the best copy editors around. So with stupid stuff like a typo we’ll just correct it, and in comments we might say, thanks, it’s been corrected.

If we published a story and it turns out we got the street wrong, we’ll just do a strike-through, and put the correct street right after it. So it’s transparent we made a mistake. If it’s something that’s been up for a while and it’s more involved, we’ll put something that says, you know, “updated” — we’ve learned that this has happened. But if we just made a big

error, we’ll be a little more contrite about it and put it in there as a full correction.

Kat Powers, Wicked Local
Be upfront about changes

My thing has always been transparency. If a post has been changed, note that it has been changed. I’m personally a fan of the strike-through approach — strike through the information and put a note in that information has been changed. Tacking it down at the bottom seems to be appropriate.

If you take stuff down, you tell people you took it down. I once posted something mean that I thought was making fun of another publication. When I reread it I was, like, what was I thinking? I was just in a bad mood and taking it out on the world. And I took the post down. But I posted another note and

I said, “I posted a rant that was really immature, I shouldn’t have done it because I was making fun of a reporter and it could be construed as making fun of a community, and I would never do that.”

Mike Orren, Pegasus News
Make changes, but don’t pull stories down

The most frequent thing that got brought to me as an ethical question or quandary from staff was, hey, we’ve got this person that wants this thing to go away.

All news sites struggle with the fact that once I post something about you, particularly if I’m a well-SEOed news site, it’s gonna be out there, front and center, forever. It’s the classic case: Scott is accused of murder, and then three months later he’s acquitted, but even if there was a story saying he was acquitted, the accused story has better SEO, so it’s going to be the top story for you forever.

When we had that situation we generally would not post a new story saying Scott was acquitted. Instead, we would do an update to the original story. But even that wasn’t enough in some cases, and we were constantly getting requests to take down stories. We’ll update it. But, you know, you don’t change the news, you don’t take down something. It happened!

Andrew Chavez, the109/Schieffer School of Journalism
Automatic revision tracking

[Every story at the109 has a tab for revealing any and all changes or revisions made to the story since it was first published.]

We had a story about a labyrinth here. It has a very spiritual component, one of the students had interviewed a woman who had a PhD in the field, who felt she was misquoted. So we made that correction, and in that case we linked to the revision that showed what was corrected.

One of the things we’re talking about is how we can make better use of that system. It’s too obscure

right now. And we’re not annotating our revisions well. We’ve been letting the system log its revisions on its own. That’s great but it creates a revision for every little change, and some of those are styling or formatting. So you can’t always see the signal from the noise.

But we’re not out any labor in including this on the site right now — it’s automatic, it runs seamlessly inside Drupal now.

Tom Warhover, Columbia Missourian
Make it a competition

We gave a class an assignment with vague directions to create something that builds excitement, gets citizens involved with making our news site better. And they developed this proposal for the “Show Me the Errors” contest [where readers win prizes for submitting the most error reports each month].

We launched it in October. It’s been a lot of fun. One guy has won like three of the last four months. There was kind of a throwdown a couple of weeks ago, internally, in which there was a challenge made to silence him — to give him nothing that he could send in a correction about. Of course he found stuff anyway. It’s kind of a friendly competition there.

It is overwhelmingly grammatical, punctuation, proper names. Occasionally there are fact-based things. So for instance today, “Glengarry Glen Ross” — we put a comma between Glengarry and Glen Ross. But there have been some pretty serious, egregious factual errors too.

There was a slew of five on one story in which we just blew every name, time, winning time, it was a track meet or something — just awful. Which is also the bittersweet pill here. It’s great that we’re catching all these things, and it sucks that we’re catching all these things!

There’s a very small amount of overlap between those who comment on stories and those who are sending in corrections. So we can track a new niche of interactivity. ■

ETHICS POLICIES

Key Takeaways:

- *Most sites lack explicit written policies or guidelines, though a handful have invested the time and resources to create them.*
- *Many editors rely on internal compasses, often shaped by their professional journalism careers.*
- *With or without company policies, the best decisions get made when more people participate in the discussion.*

Scott Lewis, Voice of San Diego
Written policy can keep it clear

We finished our written policy last year — it's still too hidden on our site. We decided we really wanted a formal policy on it. So we had a freelancer look through what NPR does and others and tried to come up with something that made sense for all of us. We had the board sign off on it, they liked it. So we put it in a nice format in PDF and posted it. (You can download that at www.J-Lab.org/ethics).

We were proud of that. As a nonprofit, 501(c)(3), we're not required to disclose all of our individual donors, but we also want to. I asked people at Minnesota Public Radio what their policy was on things like anonymous donors — that's a tough one. It's equally tough for Chuck Lewis at the Investigative Reporting Workshop to nail down. He prefers transparency. On the other hand, some big donors don't want to get solicited — they don't want to be bothered. And I'm not willing to turn down 20 grand for something like that. So it's a tough question.

David Boraks, Davidson News
Using personal judgment

I don't have a written policy. I am carrying around with me my personal code of ethics that I've developed in 25 years in the business, and it's pretty much what you'd expect.

Not all the places I've worked at have followed their own code of ethics. So it's important for each of us to carry this internally. It's got to be beyond just a written down policy.

Tracy Record, West Seattle Blog
Explain decisions as much as possible

I keep saying I would so love to write down a lot of the things that I wind up explaining to people — like, we will come to your banquet, but we can't eat and we can't drink, but thank you very much. Or, we won't show suspects' faces. But there's been no time. There's barely enough time to breathe, to eat, to get income taxes done.

I think that if you combed through our comments over the years, you would probably find me having explained most of our policies at one point or another. But there never seems to be time to be able to sit down and write it all down. I can pay freelancers to cover stories and take pictures, I can't really do that to run the site for two days so I can sit down and write down all our policies.

Howard Owens, the Batavian
No need for a written guideline

I would like to think of myself as basically a centered, ethical person. And that I don't need a written guideline because nine times out of 10 I'm going to make

the ethical choice. That's really essential for doing a job like this where you don't have that editor over you. You don't have a newsroom of people where somebody might play devil's advocate and say: should we really do that? When you're flying on your own in a competitive business environment, trying to get stuff out there, it's hard at times, very nerve-wracking, very stressful.

**Steve Buttry, Journal Register Company
Encourage internal discussion**

We like the easy rules that say OK, we don't run those names, or we run those names and let's let the chips fall where they may. But don't we make judgment calls every day in deciding what goes on the home page or the front page? We have to weigh things, we're very proud of our news judgment. Shouldn't we have the spine to take on some ethical judgments?

I like having sources like SPJ or Poynter or J-Lab that are industry voices providing ethical guidance for journalists and for news organizations. But my personal view is that organizational ethics policies exist mostly to justify firing people. They're kind of these lists of "thou shalt not" and "make sure you

As a nonprofit, 501(c)(3), we're not required to disclose all of our individual donors, but we also want to. On the other hand, some big donors don't want to get solicited — they don't want to be bothered. And I'm not willing to turn down 20 grand for something like that.

—Scott Lewis

do this." Rather than guiding people to good ethical decisions, they sometimes trap people in bad ethical decisions because they don't allow for judgment. And they don't encourage discussions, because we already know what we should do — it says, "Thou shalt never do this."

My view is that, rather than developing an ethics policy to deal with these digital issues that were not covered by the overall company policy, we need to encourage people to talk a lot about things. Mandy Jenkins, our social media producer at TBD, had some social media guidelines that were up on her blog.

And she shared those with the staff — good advice on making ethical decisions. But it wasn't a company policy that says, if you ever expressed an opinion on Twitter you'll be fired!

You don't change the news, you don't take down something. It happened!

—Mike Orren

That's a caricature of some of the ethics policies out there. But I think that having discussions and making good decisions is more important than giving people a list of dos-and-don'ts.

**Donald Heider, Loyola School of Communications
Ethics is a process**

We definitely come to it from the view that ethics is a process — it's more questions than answers. My experience in newsrooms was, ethical decisions were made when lots of people were involved and there was robust discussion. Every decision in a tough situation, there's always another side, another perspective. You're trying to make the best decision you can given the information you have. In my own experience, I've found that decisions were made that were less than ethical, or poor decisions, are often made by one or two people in isolation. Often under deadline pressure. That really convinced me, when I got in the academy, that ethics is more of a process. It's almost a skill set you develop. And it comes from asking good questions, trying to find out information, and then using some guidelines to help you as you ask those questions.

When you're flying on your own in a competitive business environment, trying to get stuff out there, it's hard at times, very nerve-wracking, very stressful.

—Howard Owens

Journalists are good at asking questions, but when you're in the middle of a mess, it's funny what escapes you. In newsrooms there are all sorts of pressures. When we find what we would consider less smart decisions, head-scratching decisions, being made, it's usually when something trumps good sense or the ability to talk through a situation. ■

CONTRIBUTORS



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Paul Bass is the editor of *New Haven Independent*, a community-driven online newspaper that publishes five days a week for New Haven, Conn., that he launched in 2005. He also serves as the executive director of the Online Journalism Project, which promotes business models for not-for-profit hyperlocal journalism. OJP also serves as fiscal agent for a number of nonprofit news startups and has launched the *Valley Independent Sentinel* to cover a nearby series of towns. Prior to launching *New Haven Independent*, Bass was an investigative reporter and editor for the *New Haven Advocate* for 15 years.



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David Boraks is founder and editor of *DavidsonNews.net* in Davidson, N.C., which launched in 2006, and recently expanded to include *CorneliusNews.net* covering a nearby town. He also is a part-time announcer and reporter for public radio station WFAE-FM in Charlotte. From 2001 to 2005, he covered the top U.S. banks for the daily *American Banker* in New York. In 2000, he was a senior correspondent for the online news service *LocalBusiness.com*. At *The Charlotte Observer* from 1993 to 2000, his duties included tech columnist, business writer and assistant features editor. He has also worked at *The Hartford (Conn.) Courant* and *The China News in Taipei*; Editor-in-chief of *The Cambridge (Mass.) Chronicle*, and *The Waterbury (Conn.) Republican*.



GLENN BURKINS *Qcitymetro.com*

Glenn Burkins is the editor and publisher of *Qcitymetro.com* and *QcityBride.com*, the online news site and companion bridal site designed for African-Americans in Charlotte, N.C. He sells ads, sponsorships and business listings to support the sites, emphasizing a strong connection to the community. Before launching *Qcitymetro.com* in 2008, Burkins was the deputy managing editor at *The Charlotte Observer*. He also worked as a reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *St. Petersburg Times*. He has served as an Africa correspondent, business reporter and White House correspondent.



STEVE BUTTRY *Journal Register Company*

Steve Buttry leads community engagement for the *Journal Register Company* and is the former director of community engagement at *TBD.com*, a hyperlocal news site for the Washington, D.C. area, which launched in 2010. His experience in news spans more than 40 years, with positions at the *Des Moines Register*, *Kansas City Star and Times* and *Minot Daily News*. Before moving to Washington, Buttry worked for *Gazette Communications* as the editor of *The Gazette* in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He has also trained journalists and newspaper executives around the world and researched journalistic innovations for the *American Press Institute*.



ANDREW CHAVEZ *the109 and Schieffer School of Journalism*

Andrew Chavez is the director of digital media for the *Schieffer School of Journalism* at *Texas Christian University* in Fort Worth. He oversees *the109*, a local news site that covers the 76109 ZIP code, and advises the school's digital operations. He also advises *TCU 360*, a student news website operated by *Schieffer School* students. Before coming to *TCU*, Chavez worked at the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* as a part-time night police reporter.



LIZ GEORGE Baristanet

Liz George is co-owner of Baristanet.com, a hyperlocal blogging and citizen journalism website based in Montclair, N.J. She works as a writer and editor and helps broaden Baristanet’s reader base, which currently reaches additional towns in Essex County. George also contributes to specialty magazines and the New York Daily News. She spent the beginning of her journalism career as an editor at Weight Watchers Magazine and has written about hyperlocal journalism for Nieman Reports and PressThink.



DONALD HEIDER Loyola School of Communication

Don Heider is the Founding Dean and Professor at the School of Communication at Loyola University Chicago. He previously served as Associate Dean at the University of Maryland and served as Graduate Advisor and Head of Broadcast Journalism while on the faculty at the University of Texas at Austin. He also served on the faculty at the University of Colorado at Boulder and the University of Mississippi. Before that Heider worked for 10 years as a photographer, reporter, producer and manager in television news. Heider has authored and edited four books and received five Emmy awards, a regional Edward R. Murrow, and a Tennessee Associated Press Award.



ANDREW HUFF Gapers Block

Andrew Huff is the editor and publisher of Gapers Block, an award-winning Chicago-centric news and events webzine he co-founded in 2003. He holds a journalism degree from Ohio State University and a certificate in medical writing and editing from the University of Chicago, and is an adjunct instructor in the journalism department at Loyola University Chicago.



LANCE KNOBEL Berkeleyside

Lance Knobel is co-founder of Berkeleyside.com, a local news site for Berkeley, Calif. He also works as a strategy advisor, where much of his work concentrates on the intersection of business, geopolitics and technology.



SCOTT LEWIS Voice of San Diego

Scott Lewis is CEO of voiceofsandiego.org, one of the earliest non-profit investigative news sites, which launched in 2005. In addition to heading the website’s business, fundraising and marketing strategies, Lewis also blogs on local politics in the San Diego area. He started covering the political beat for voiceofsandiego.org in 2005 and was awarded best column in San Diego by both the San Diego Press Club and San Diego Society of Professional Journalists in 2007. He previously worked at the Salt Lake City Weekly and San Diego Daily Transcript.



HOWARD OWENS The Batavian

Howard Owens is publisher of The Batavian, a local online-only news site for Batavia and Genesee County in New York. He has worked as the director of digital publishing for GateHouse Media and served as the VP of Interactive for the Bakersfield Californian. Owens has been in the news industry for more than 20 years. When he was director of new media for The Ventura County Star, the organization won the Online News Association’s General Excellence Award in 2004.



MIKE ORREN Pegasus News

Mike Orren founded Pegasus News, an online community news site for the Dallas-Fort Worth area, in 2005. He also established PanLocal Media, which serves as publisher of a number of affiliate sites. These sites won the Katie Award for best news website and an Eppy award for best entertainment website in 2008. Orren has worked as a publisher of American Lawyer Media’s Texas Lawyer and Associate Publisher of D Magazine. He left Pegasus News shortly after being interviewed for this project to consult for select media companies, retailers and nonprofits.



BARRY PARR Coastsider

Barry Parr is the publisher of Coastsider, a community news site for coastal San Mateo County, and MediaSavvy, a blog about networked media. Parr is a former senior analyst at Forrester Research, covering media and advertising and has served as E-commerce Research Director at “International Data Corporation” and Vice President of News at CNET.



ANDREW PERGAM J-Lab

Andrew Pergam, a former broadcast journalist and managing editor, is the Editorial Director of J-Lab. In this role, he works with J-Lab grantees and oversees the creation of new learning tools for professional and citizen journalists. Most recently, he led the strategic growth and editorial operations of NBCCConnecticut.com. Andy earned a master’s degree from Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism and serves on the school’s alumni board.



KAT POWERS Wicked Local

Having failed at waitressing, politics and headhunting, Kat Powers found her calling in journalism, ultimately becoming the somewhat cantankerous editor of the Somerville Journal for almost a decade. Now she’s one of the managing editors at WickedLocal.com, a subsidiary of GateHouse Media.



TRACY RECORD West Seattle Blog

Tracy Record is co-publisher and editor of West Seattle Blog, which was launched in 2005 as a hobby. It became a full-time professional, commercial news operation in 2007, and Record quit her job as assistant news director at Seattle’s KCPQ-TV to work on WSB full time. Record also spent two years working for Walt Disney Internet Group, including a position as the executive producer of ABCNews.com, following eight years at Seattle’s KOMO-TV, during which she became the station’s first new-media executive producer. Her 30+-year career has included a national Online Journalism Award and regional Society of Professional Journalists



JAN SCHAFFER J-Lab

Jan Schaffer, executive director of J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism, runs the nation’s most successful incubator for news entrepreneurs and is a leading thinker on the emerging new media landscape. A former Business Editor and a Pulitzer Prize winner for The Philadelphia Inquirer, she left daily journalism in 1994 to lead pioneering journalism initiatives in civic journalism, interactive and participatory journalism and citizen media ventures. She launched J-Lab in 2002.



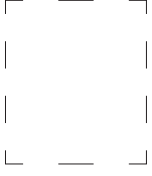
TOM WARHOVER Columbia Missourian/Missouri School of Journalism

Tom Warhover is an associate professor and chair of the print and digital news faculty at the Missouri School of Journalism. He also is the executive editor for innovation at the Columbia Missourian, a community newspaper edited by professionals and staffed by students. Before joining the university, Warhover worked at The Virginian-Pilot newspaper as a copy editor, designer, reporter, city editor and deputy managing editor.

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