

## **SPJ Ethics Week 2015 Op-Ed 4.24.15**

### **When journalists make news, it's not good | By Fred Brown, SPJ Ethics Committee Co-Vice Chair**

A gyrocopter lands on the Capitol lawn, and it turns out the Tampa Bay Times knew about the stunt well in advance but waited until the last minute to tell authorities.

Rolling Stone retracts a long article about a gang rape on the University of Virginia campus after its primary source is shown to be unreliable.

Trusted newscasters Brian Williams and Bill O'Reilly are called out for exaggerating, though the consequences for each differ markedly.

And that's just the most notorious of the recent journalistic misbehavior. There is no shortage of bad examples.

Journalists should be reporting news, not making news. But all too often, journalists have been the focus of news stories that raise serious ethical questions.

Monday, April 27, marks the start of what the Society of Professional Journalists has designated Ethics Week, when SPJ puts particular emphasis on the importance of responsible reporting. Ethics Week began in 2003, and today it's as important as ever – maybe more important, given recent events – especially in a media environment where there are an unfortunate number of unreliable sources.

This year's Ethics Week comes a few months after SPJ completed more than a year of effort revising its Code of Ethics. It's a voluntary code, advisory and not enforceable, but for decades, it has been the go-to standard for news organizations.

Many news media outlets have their own codes of ethics; a lot of them use the SPJ code as the starting point. Employers' codes are more detailed, and there's a price to pay if they aren't followed. Journalists can lose their jobs for violating the company standards, and some have.

Those employers' codes tend to go into great detail about what constitutes a conflict of interest. For many people, in journalism and out, that's the major part of ethical behavior – avoiding conflicts of interest. But for responsible journalists, ethics goes well beyond that.

Ethical journalism is rooted in accurate reporting and responsible behavior.

Those have been guiding principles throughout the 88-year history of the SPJ code, and remained the touchstones when the code was updated. It had been 16 years since the code was last revised. Some of the language was outdated, especially provisions that mentioned specific technologies and processes.

Some critics wanted the code to be more specific and instructive; some felt transparency should be stressed over independence.

Ultimately, the revision committee decided that basic principles don't change when the technology changes. The four major principles remain the same: Seek truth, minimize harm, act independently and be accountable.

The committee made the final provision "Be Accountable and Transparent." Transparency is good, we felt, but not a substitute for being aware of one's biases and wary of outside influences.

The committee is in the process of adding explanations and examples as links to the online code (accessible at [spj.org](http://spj.org)) – elements that can change as journalistic practices evolve.

In the end, the revisions committee made the code itself as broad as possible, to focus on abiding principles and avoid ever-changing technologies, in the hope that such a "constitutional" approach would survive for decades.

The importance of those abiding principles is illustrated by recent media misbehavior.

The Tampa Bay Times stressed storytelling and didn't pay enough attention to minimizing the possible harm that could come from a stunt played out on the Capitol grounds.

Rolling Stone worried too much about minimizing harm and let protecting its source get in the way of truthful, accurate reporting.

Brian Williams and Bill O'Reilly represent opposite approaches to the principle of accountability. NBC suspended Williams for his off-camera embellishments; Fox instead criticized the media that were criticizing O'Reilly.

All this might lead one to accept the tired old joke that journalism ethics is an oxymoron. It isn't. But it is a constant challenge.

One week a year isn't enough, but at least it's an opportunity to focus on the axiom that serious media need to be reliable and responsible, 52 weeks a year. Journalists need to be constantly aware that their job is to report the news – accurately, compassionately, independently and responsibly – and to stay out of the headlines.

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*Brown officially retired from The Denver Post in early 2002, but continues to write a Sunday editorial page column for the newspaper. He also does analysis for Denver's NBC television station, teaches communication ethics at the University of Denver, and is a principal in Hartman & Brown, LLP, a media training and consulting firm. He has won several awards for writing and community service, including a Sigma Delta Chi Award for editorial writing in 1988. He is an Honor Alumnus of Colorado State University, a member of the Denver Press Club Hall of Fame, and serves on the boards of directors of Colorado Public Radio, the Colorado Freedom of Information Council and the Sigma Delta Chi Foundation.*