

How Editors Really Handle It

Breaking Point

Tensions have reached a boiling point between the conservative working-class people in your area and the many gay residents who recently moved in. Conflict has been escalating and recently became violent after a gay pride parade brought hundreds of people from across the state to town. About 300 people marched in the event while other individuals and groups protested along the parade route — many of whom believe homosexuals are sexually deviant and harmful to society. The parade quickly degenerated into a mob scene with protesters shouting epithets and even throwing bottles that seriously injured some in the parade. Police are investigating the case of one gay couple who were severely beaten as they tried to leave the parade. A few days later, a story moves across the state wire about a gay soccer coach who was arrested and charged with molesting several players on his peewee soccer team. The story has real news value and under normal circumstances would run under the state briefs section but you're afraid that it might cause more hostility. Do you run this factually accurate story despite the possibility that it may incite violence?

Any story in the newspaper has potential consequences, either positive or negative. Standard criteria for newsworthiness suggest that the story has merit. At the same time, newspapers shouldn't aggravate a bad situation unnecessarily. In such cases, many journalists believe that the newspaper can't let fear of upsetting the public prevent

publication. The key, they say, is in presenting the issue fairly.

Key questions include: Would similar questions arise if the suspect were heterosexual? Is sexual orientation central to the story? Being gay does not make you a pedophile, so the article should emphasize correlation not causation.

"Gays do not molest children, pedophiles do," says Lou Clancy, editorial director, Sun Newspapers, Ontario, Canada. "The word gay should not appear. It is not relevant. A separate story could define pedophilia, making it clear this is not about being straight or gay."

To tackle volatile community atmosphere, the newspaper can serve as a forum for facilitating discussion and understanding of the issue. Bob Haiman, senior fellow with the Poynter Institute, suggests the paper utilize the editorial page to promote reason and balance. In so doing, the newspaper removes the element of censorship from legitimate news stories.

Haiman: The story is legitimate and should be run. Newspapers cannot let fear of consequences deter them from running legitimate news, for that is a path down a slippery slope that never ends. If the paper thinks the community needs calming, let it call for calm by doing so on the editorial page, not by censoring legitimate news.



Through the Camera Lens

Each week your newspaper publishes a photo commentary titled Point of View. The pictures are generally offbeat, one-photograph documentaries. The goal of the feature is to run photos — without captions — that capture a moment in the lives of ordinary people. Last Sunday your publication printed a wedding photo with newlyweds feeding one another cake. The only extraordinary thing about the photo was that the couple in the picture was two men. During the next week, your newspaper is flooded with complaints and letters to the editor from readers who don't feel the photo was appropriate. The response has been so strong that you feel you should acknowledge what readers are saying. On the other hand, the couple pictured do not want to comment or respond. As far as they are concerned, they agreed to share a moment in their life, not make a political statement. In order to present fair coverage, you will need to actively seek responses from those not offended by the photograph. How do you balance these conflicting issues?

Editors at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* were faced with a similar situation after running the photograph from a gay wedding in June 2000. The image served as a feature in Point of View, which allows photographers to use pictures the same way a columnist employs words — to express a belief.

St. Louis introduced Point of View in April 2000 and remains one of the few newspapers

to publish such a commentary. Photographers volunteer for Point of View projects and shoot these assignments separate from news stories. Yet readers have voiced negative remarks toward other photos run in the feature, prompting editors to consider the newspaper's role in provoking discussion. They ultimately decided that the photographs should convey something interesting and encourage viewers to examine an issue in a new light.

Below are comments from Carolyn Kingcade, production editor with the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, concerning how the newspaper responded to reader feedback on the gay wedding photo.

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Date: Sunday, June 11, 2000

The Complete Picture Sometimes Can Be More Than Readers Want

By Carolyn Kingcade

Our newspaper last week troubled an impressive number of readers for an assortment of reasons. The common denominator: Readers reacted strongly to messages that run contrary to the values they hold dear.

More than 100 comments came in response to a photo Monday that appeared in the Point of View feature on the Commentary Page. It showed two gay men kissing at their wedding reception.

Director of photography Larry Coyne and editorial editor Christine Bertelson started

Point of View in April as a visual complement to the opinion pieces on the Commentary Page. Photographers are asked to shoot pictures that carry a message and provoke reflection.

Photojournalist Laurie Skrivan took the picture May 20 at the Radisson Hotel in Clayton. In many ways it's a very traditional picture showing the happy couple kissing with the three-tier-wedding cake in the background. The critical difference: The newlyweds are men — Tim Molloy, 29, and Brian Duck, 27. It is a gay marriage right here in River City.

Gay marriages are not recognized by Missouri law. The question of same-sex marriages or legal rights for gay couples is very much part of a national debate. The Vermont Legislature voted in April to recognize legal unions between couples of the same gender, placing the issue before other states' lawmakers.

Skrivan said the news from Vermont inspired her to make a statement here about intolerance toward gay people. She wanted the picture to make the point that gay marriages exist in our communities, too. "I think it's enough that two people care about each other," Skrivan said. "I think other people should just support that."

Skrivan went to school with one of the men she photographed and was invited to the ceremony with full understanding that the photo was for Point of View. This is not the first gay ceremony here. But many gay marriages remain closeted affairs.

Many readers would like to keep it that way. Most said the paper was irresponsible to print the photo.

"My wife and I were offended by this photo," one caller said. "I feel you are trying to force the public to accept this type of lifestyle. We have children reading the paper, and this is not something they need to be exposed to."

Few readers saw merit in the photo. But one

man, who said he was not gay, commented: "They look happy. Let them have their picture. I think it's great that the paper ran it. More power to Laurie Skrivan."

Coyne, the photo editor, notes that the comments we got a day or two later could be more reactions than reflections. But the idea of Point of View, he said, is really not to sway people one way or the other.

"It's about variety. There are many, many life experiences that people don't know about. We can take them places they can't go. Then, let them make up their own minds."

He's right. An important role for a newspaper is to show readers a more complete picture of the world. That often means revealing aspects of life that are unpleasant for some readers.

Some readers like their paper to challenge their thinking. But the truth is, people often look to the newspaper to validate their values. We get the loudest cries from readers when we publish material contrary to the way they believe the world works or ought to work. The issue arose again last week with another photograph. It showed two boys playing with a shopping cart.

A few callers mentioned that it was risky for two children to be rolling down a city street. But all were indignant because they believed the cart had undoubtedly been swiped from a merchant at some point in its history.

"It raised my old-fashioned ire," one caller said. "I think that's the problem with the world today. People don't respect something that belongs to someone else."

You can also see bruised values in the calls about the gratuitous graphic description of golfer Payne Stewart's untimely death. He and five companions died of hypoxia when their small plane lost cabin pressure in October and crashed. The objectionable passages appeared Monday in excerpts of a new book on Stewart in the Everyday section.

For some readers the detail about what Stewart probably experienced as he died was beyond the realm of what they wanted to know about their world. Moreover, it violated their sense of respect for the dead.

"Whoever edited this really ought to be sat down and talked to," one caller said. "I can't tell you how upset I am."

Newspapers pride themselves on providing readers with a daily dose of reality. But the best editors recognize that discretion and judgment play an important role as well.

The gay marriage photo worked as commentary and was well-suited for Point of

View. The response from readers was as it should be. The point, after all, was to get people to think and talk about the photo.

The shopping cart photo was presented as a salute to summer fun. But readers were right. The message of risky or questionable behavior in feature photos should be considered along with the visual appeal.

And certainly there are times when graphic details are definitely essential to the story. But this was not the case with the Payne Stewart excerpts.



Disclosure

Your newspaper publishes a weekly scoop column highlighting local and state government news. During a conversation with one of her sources, a reporter discovers that a local couple donated \$50,000 to the city for youth outreach programs. Unbeknownst to the reporter, the donors asked that their contribution be kept anonymous. The name of the couple runs in the column; they are subsequently harassed with solicitation phone calls and their home is vandalized. The couple, who is not wealthy, is furious with the city and with the newspaper. After being robbed and harassed, they finally decide to withdraw their donation. The loss of funds will be a blow to many newly planned programs. How do you cover the story?

Arizona Republic editors were confronted with a similar dilemma when reporter Edythe Jensen discovered that a local couple donated \$50,000 to the city for funding youth programs. The donation was given to a government agency making the pertinent details subject to Freedom of Information Act requests. Yet unlike contributions from a prominent figure or a political action committee, these were private individuals who wished to have their generosity remain anonymous. Striking a balance between such opposing views presented a difficult situation for editors. Did the donation itself serve as the central factor? Or was the couple who made the contribution at the heart of the story? Richard de Uriarte,

reader advocate with the Arizona Republic, provides his insight on the situation below:

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The ethical question: What's in a name?

By Richard de Uriarte

A political action committee funnels \$50,000 to a state legislative candidate. Is it a journalist's job to reveal it?

Of course.

A local lawyer gives \$50,000 to an old friend plagued with money problems. The friend happens to be mayor. Is that news? Absolutely. Our mission, after all, is to share information with the public. Let readers decide what it all means.

Sounds good. But it's not always so easy.

What if a Queen Creek couple donate \$50,000 to the town, asking only that the money be used for youth programs and that the gifts remain anonymous? Do you run their names?

That was the dilemma Republic reporters and editors recently struggled with.

Reporter Edythe Jensen wasn't poring over financial records when she learned of the family's generosity. It was in a casual conversation with a source.

"I thought it was a good story," she said, "of average people who are extremely generous."

But journalists can't take it on a town manager's word that a benefactor has no ulterior motive, no hidden connection, no private agenda. The reporter's credo: If your mother says she loves you, check it out.

Queen Creek officials, however, refused to reveal the identities of the donors. The Arizona Republic made a public-records request to obtain the names.

The generous, and anonymous, Queen Creek residents were insistent. They didn't want their names mentioned.

"We're not the story," one of them told me. "We're not special."

Jensen's checking satisfied editors that the couple's generosity was sincere. They were not interested in favorable treatment down the road. But the issue of naming them divided reporters and editors and editors among themselves. Everybody involved agonized.

Deputy Managing Editor John D'Anna: "I saw clearly the public-record and public-right-to-know arguments. I just felt I needed a more compelling reason to put their names in the paper."

East Valley bureau chief Paul Maryniak was equally torn. He didn't want to expose the

donors against their will.

"But I felt uncomfortable withholding the information," he told me. "That's not our job.

Our responsibility is disclosing information."

Ultimately, that argument carried the day. The story ran Friday, July 21, in The Republic's Southeast Community editions.

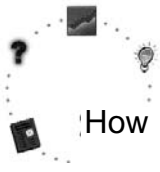
Many readers were touched by the couple's kindness. Others, like Chandler resident Jay Hawkins, were critical.

"The story could have been just as effective without the names," he said.

The Queen Creek donors were unhappy as well, though they have not been harassed, so far, by fundraisers.

On one point, however, they are surely wrong.

They were the story. They are special people.



Private Life

A female producer at one of the TV stations in your town has come forward accusing a local television host of sexual harassment. Hours after charges were filed, the local television stations and competing newspapers have jumped on the story — reporting her allegations in great detail. Your paper assigns an investigative reporter to work on the story. The reporter uncovers some interesting details about the producer's past. It turns out that while a high school athlete, she accused a teacher of having sex with her. The teacher was dismissed and although no details of the case were ever made public, some suggest that she made up her story to exact revenge upon the teacher. Close friends say it was one of the most painful experiences of her life and beg you not to make it public. What do you do?

Journalism evolves around high-pressure coverage decisions, particularly with breaking news stories. Should fair methods be sacrificed in the effort to scoop other media? Does the newspaper lose credibility if published facts later prove erroneous? Given the fast-paced dynamic of such situations, it is vital to consider how accurate and complete information may be. Circumstances surrounding the allegations — both past and present — warrant additional research prior to presuming a behavior pattern. Questions about the woman's accusation against her high school coach linger: the exact nature of their relationship, ability to hear from both sides about what happened and other mitigating factors.

Uncertainty concerning details of this past charge stand out to shrewd editors and reporters, although how to tackle the situation varies from newsroom to newsroom.

The teacher was dismissed meaning someone found credence in the woman's accusations, says Bob Haiman, senior fellow with the Poynter Institute. Consequently such information should be published, but the newspaper must ensure their coverage does not sensationalize the issue.

Similar to many situations, additional information is necessary before making a sound decision, says Earl Maucker, editor, Sun-Sentinel, Fort Lauderdale, Fla.. If further reporting proves this past incident irrelevant to the sexual harassment lawsuit, Maucker would refrain from publishing the details.

This judgment does not result from friends' requests, because private citizens should not have the capability to dictate what is or is not news. Instead, his choice is based upon merit and thorough reporting — the accusation has no relation to current circumstances.

To maintain balanced coverage, the reporter also has a responsibility to find out if other sexual harassment charges have been brought against the host. The newspaper should be wary to focus the investigation solely upon the accuser. Such action presumes a measure of guilt simply by default.

Lou Clancy editorial director, **Sun Newspapers, Ontario, Canada:** Too many unanswered questions. Was sex with the teacher consensual? If so, what is relevance? What attempts were made to track teacher? What does she have to say about high school experience? Isn't it already public and just the details not? What is nature of sexual harassment charge? What does accused have to say and why are all our concerns about the person making the charges? Until more is known about high school and you have her response, first story should be straightforward he said, she said. Privacy issue should be subject to relevance. Unless more is known there is nothing [to] suggest a pattern. There is no one size fits all, but one should be very careful about linking historic oranges with today's apple.

Haiman: I would publish the facts, but down in the body of the story, not as a lede or on a separate story. In other words, don't exploit it or hype it. We don't know if her charges in the original incident were true or not. But the teacher WAS dismissed which means that SOMEBODY found them to be valid and supported. Again, do not try to be "nice" to people by not publishing relevant material. The job of a newspaper is to publish, not to not

publish. That should be done sensitively and carefully, without sensationalizing it, but it must be done.

Maucker: These are the kinds of questions we face every day to one extent or the other. In this case, I would send my reporter back for more information. From what you are telling me here, her past does not appear to be relevant and I likely would not use her past — not because friends are begging, but because it does not appear to have any bearing on this particular case.

If we felt it was worthy, our argument would be its relevancy to the case. There are so many variables to consider, there is not an easy answer to the question. Lots of critical thinking must go into a decision. What is the relevance? Are public figures involved? How public is this case? What specifically are the accusations?

Each story must be considered on its merit. I know that sounds trite, but it is really true.

Generally these issues are much more complex than they appear initially and require extensive reporting before really good sophisticated decisions can be made.



Teen Scene

The use of the drug Ecstasy is growing among the teen-age population. A young education reporter is working on a story about the effectiveness of drug abuse resistance education (D.A.R.E.). The reporter got permission from a local high school to interview students about these classes. During his interviews, the reporter asked if Ecstasy was popular among local teens and what effect, if any, the classes had on its use. Several students named hangouts where they bought and used Ecstasy. The reporter checked out the story and after some further reporting, you run a story describing how extensive drug use is and how ineffectual the program seems to be. After the story runs, parents and school officials call the newspaper saying that the story is one-sided and makes the program look bad. They say the story even encourages kids to use drugs by telling them where to buy them and making it seem like everyone is doing it. They demand that you run a second story interviewing students who have not used drugs and who can be positive role models. How do you respond?

The efficacy of drug abuse resistance education, or D.A.R.E., programs have come under scrutiny in recent years. In some cases the curriculum lacked measurable results, prompting deliberation about reform. Were efforts being concentrated in the wrong areas? Could students not relate to how the material was presented?

Conducting interviews to determine if D.A.R.E. programs dissuaded students from using drugs serves as an effective means of

examining the program. Including a teen perspective remains as important as comments from parents, administrators and police. Such coverage can facilitate community discussion about school programs as well as efforts by other groups to curb teen substance abuse.

But the newspaper does not have an obligation to assist the school in portraying a negative representation of drug use. The school district has other forums to convey that message, says Janet Weaver, executive editor, Sarasota (FL) Herald-Tribune. As journalists, our task is to cover news and provide information to the community.

The newspaper does, however, have a responsibility to offer a balanced story prior to deeming the program a failure. Are there students who have not used drugs or stopped due to what they learned in the program? How extensive is student drug use and what are law enforcement officers doing to crack down on such behavior?

Students, parents and administrators must have the ability to address program concerns, offer suggestions for improvement and respond to allegations of growing teen drug use.

To alleviate concerns about this story, the newspaper should re-examine its coverage to determine if the story was one-sided. Central questions in this examination include

concrete data showing how many students actually use drugs, views of students for and against D.A.R.E. programs and ability for parties to respond before the story ran. Failure to address these concerns and gather accurate information signifies shoddy reporting, according to Bob Haiman of the Poynter Institute. The time to consider such questions is prior to running the story, not after.

If internal review shows the story failed to address these concerns, the newspaper has a duty to write a second article. The story must reflect community response and provide an outlet for students, parents and administrators to comment.

If further analysis demonstrates that initial coverage was sound, a letter to readers from the editor or a follow-up story examining community response would be warranted says Lou Clancy, editorial director, Sun Newspapers, Ontario, Canada.

Hard-and-fast rules concerning how to tackle this situation do not exist. But via objective coverage the newspaper can play an integral role in the problem-solving process by addressing concerns about D.A.R.E., responding to feedback about the story, and aiding in healthy dialogue.

Clancy: The newspaper does have a responsibility as a citizen to point out the dangers of drug use and could be justified in treating coverage as a campaign, looking at what schools and indeed others are doing to help. But it also has a responsibility to "tell the truth, not bury its head in the sand." Why does the school have a program if there isn't

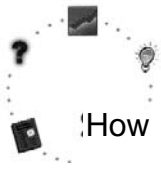
a problem? A newspaper cannot lend itself to pure promotion — it means sticking one's head in the sand. The public service here could be that kids are ignoring dangers despite school attempts at education. However, there are several tests this story must meet. "Several" using drugs [do] not indicate a program is failing, especially in a society where drug use is pervasive. Also, previous experience has taught us teens talk a big story, which may not add up to reality. Did reporter expose places where drugs were purchased? Did school and police get adequate chance to respond to findings BEFORE story was printed? Did the story reflect whether a MAJORITY of students did or did not use ecstasy? If not, were they adequately reflected in story? Did story explore the problems associated with Ecstasy, including the chance of more harmful drugs being substituted by dealers? Did the school get opportunity to bring forward cases [where] student quit or decided against using drugs? If such tests were met, the best I would offer is the chance to respond in a letter and/or a straightforward news story noting reaction to story.

Weaver: The newspaper does not have a responsibility to help the school promote a negative message about drugs. The school district has many venues through which to send that message — in classroom discussions, letters to parents, ads in the paper, etc. Our responsibility is to cover the news as we find it. The fact that we had to interview students about the classes shouldn't color how we use what we learn during the course of the interview. I would want to make sure the story was not one-sided, that we had explored whether there

had been successes through the classes. But in order to have a productive discussion in the community about drug use among young people, we would have to document what is happening, how kids are using drugs and talking about them, what the culture of drug use is. In doing that, we perform a greater service than mouthing platitudes about how bad drugs are.

Haiman: It's not about "promotion"; it's about fairness. The first story, in order to be bal-

anced, should have included material about students who do not use drugs and who are opposed. It also should have included statistics that made it clear what percentages of students do and do not use drugs. (To say drug use is "growing" is sloppy and lazy reporting. Exactly how much has it grown? What are the specific numbers?) It was flawed by the absence of this material. But it's too late now to fix the first story, so a second one is warranted.



Front Page Politics

Your newspaper will publish a 40-inch profile on each candidate in the upcoming state senate race. The first installment about the Republican candidate's political and private life runs this week. During the interview process, an ex-husband — who also managed her campaigns early in her career — mentions that she had an abortion in the late 1970s. He also furnishes substantial evidence, including supporting medical documentation. The candidate has been outspoken concerning her opposition to abortion, so this new information doesn't fit in with her voting record and policies. But she has refused to comment. Is this information part of her private life or does the public have a right and need to know?

Journalists are consistently challenged to evaluate the details of an individual's personal life with the public's right to know. While private citizens can assume some measure of confidentiality about the particulars of their life, the scenario takes on added dimension for those within the public eye.

Frequently there is a supposition that the indiscretions — both past and present — of celebrities, political candidates and other famous people should automatically become the focus of stories. In some instances such coverage represents newsworthy information, but at other times borders on gossip. Reporters and editors

must critically examine the circumstances of the event and determine if it warrants inclusion in the paper.

The senatorial candidate has made abortion a platform of her campaign, which means the voting public has justification to know why she made this decision. Had the issue not been raised, notes Bob Haiman, senior fellow at the Poynter Institute, the topic would be mute unless another candidate raised it on the record.

For a complete understanding of this situation, interviews should be arranged with all involved parties. What are the motives of the ex-husband in disclosing this information? Why has he chosen to come forward? Responding to concerns of potential source bias ensures the article remains focused on the central issue — the candidate's decision to have an abortion.

Every attempt should be made to have the candidate discuss the circumstances surrounding her abortion, including any extenuating circumstances that prompted her to take this course of action. Editors should remind the candidate that despite misgivings on talking about the abortion, allowing the story to run without her comment serves as a disservice not only to her but also to the public.

Publishing this information might cost the candidate the election. As a result the

paper must structure the story around the proper time frame, that this event occurred more than two decades ago. As Janet Weaver, executive editor, Sarasota (FL) Herald-Tribune, points out, many people do things or hold viewpoints that change over time. The variation in her stance on abortion might be a combination of personal experience and maturing as an individual.

Weaver also suggests talking to other sources to see if having an abortion and later opposing abortion is common — that one might evolve from the other. Yet giving the candidate a forum to present her story affords citizens an opportunity to review the facts and reach their own conclusions.

Lou Clancy editorial director, Sun Newspapers, Ontario, Canada: The candidate has made abortion an issue and therefore her choice to have one is absolutely the public's right to know. The policy and her candidacy both are her decisions. It would be a disservice to voters not to inform them if this is a crucial campaign issue. But every effort must be made to get her reasons why. Why is the ex-husband coming forward? His bias should also be in the story. Does he know why she had an abortion (was she a rape victim)? Public must know of each attempt to get her on her record and story should be absolutely clear on her stand. For example, would she allow abortion in case of rape?

- 1) Any harm done is a result of the candidate's actions.
- 2) Re: Time frame — There are woman today facing this hard choice and many people who would make it for them. Only the candidate can explain why it is not relevant.

Weaver: If a candidate's public pronouncements are in direct contradiction to private behavior, the community has a right to know that, to use that information to weigh the judgment of the candidate. This case is particularly difficult, because many of us do things as young people and then change our minds as we age. In fact, the abortion could have influenced her current position — she may have had a strong change of heart based on her personal experience. I would want my reporters to be very persistent in their attempts to get her to talk about this, up to and including an appeal from the editor herself that the candidate talk to us about the story. If she didn't, I believe we would still need to report the information given her outspoken opposition to abortion. I would look for other sources to talk about the fact that having an abortion and then later in life opposing abortion isn't necessarily contradictory — in fact, one might flow logically from another.

I would also want to make sure that the story put the time period in context. We would recognize that publishing the information could be embarrassing, and could cost the candidate the election, and we would need to frame the story very carefully given that.

Haiman: The key is that this candidate has made her opposition to abortion a big issue in her campaign. So the information is relevant and should be verified and published. If she had not made abortion an issue — or was running for an office that had nothing to do with abortion (say, city council) — then it would not be relevant unless another candidate raised it, on the record.