

# Ethics and Standards in Newsrooms Today

BY SHARON PETERS, Ph.D

*Some misguided, unguided behavior*



Kellogg School of Management and Medill School of Journalism



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## Contents

Introduction: Signs of Trouble on the Horizon?	Page 7
Overview: Sins of the Present, Fears for the Future	Page 13
Whence Cometh THE WORD	Page 19
Bad Apples or Poor Guidance?	Page 25
Days of Wine and Roses and Sports Tickets	Page 41
Inconsistency, Laxity and Concern	Page 51
Many People, Many Voices, Many Views	Page 59
Once Distant Drums Grow Louder Still	Page 65
Conclusions and Recommendations	Page 69
Appendix: Methodology	Page 75



## **Ethics and Standards in Newsrooms Today**

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# Preface

We all know the importance of journalism ethics. They enable newspapers to stand somewhere above the other professions. They make us credible.

There are many things journalists simply do not do. We know it's wrong to get emotionally involved with a source, supervisor or superior. We would never allow ourselves to be influenced by gifts or anything else that skews a story. And making up sources or quotes is unthinkable. Or is it?

How consistently do journalists live up to presumed ethics and standards in newsrooms around the county? Do managers always know what is going on in their own newsroom? And do they crack down hard when someone steps out of line?

This research study by Sharon Peters provides some eye-opening answers, based on responses from journalists in 20 newsrooms. The results are in many instances unsettling. The findings suggest that while some newsrooms hold to very high ethics and standards, the codes and expectations are rarely discussed and erratically enforced in many. And in the absence of clear communication, many staffers find themselves on their own to determine right from wrong. Some are not making very good decisions, according to their colleagues.

This study spells out, in fascinating detail, what nearly 1,000 journalists report about behavior in their own newsrooms.



# Introduction

## *Signs of trouble on the horizon?*

*“There will always be people who cut corners for personal gain or other reasons. But as a whole, newsrooms are dominated by people who are trying to do the right things.”*

— Metro editor, 40, metro newspaper

*“Ethics can’t be discussed too much. Just when you think everyone understands all the pitfalls and realizes the need for honor and ethics, some asshole decides he can justify anything and does something flagrant like stealing someone’s Voicemail.”*

— Metro editor, 47, metro newspaper

*“Once in awhile there’s a big stink somewhere and we all have to rethink how we operate. It’s a good thing.”*

— National editor, 34, metro paper

*“I recently made the transition from TV news to print. From my experience, it seems the print media has a stricter ethics code than the broadcast media.”*

— Online editor, 37, midsize paper

*“Ethics are ever shifting, but terminally slouching toward Wall Street.”*

— Features reporter, 50, small newspaper

*“While I like to think I work with a pretty professional group, I also know we all love seeing our names in the paper, and it isn’t too much of a stretch to imagine this getting to the ‘whatever it takes’ level.”*

— Reporter, 43, metro newspaper

*“Ethics at newspapers today is often little more than the latest corporate buzzword.”*

— Metro reporter, 31, metro newspaper

*“Cynical we may be, but ethical we definitely are.”*

— Metro editor, 48, metro newspaper

*“Don’t ask, don’t tell. That’s how we handle ethics in this newsroom.”*

— Sports reporter, 45, metro newspaper

Ask a bunch of newspaper people for the inside line on just about anything, and they will usually let loose with all they know. This is particularly true when the question has to do with what happens within the confines of their own industry and their own offices.

So reporters, editors and copy editors, given the opportunity during the first weeks of the new century to speak out on the matter of standards and ethics, unleashed thousands of ardent assertions.

There was, predictably, a full range of impressions and opinions from the nearly 1,000 who seized the opportunity.

Many believe the state of ethics is high:

*“There is a lot more awareness of ethics issues today than there used to be. A great deal more effort and energy [are] applied to the topic today, than, say, 25 years ago. Far more practices are forbidden today.”*

— Features editor, 43, metro newspaper

*“When compared to other media, we do very well. From ambush television news programs to Internet sites trying to sell themselves as actual journalists, we stack up very, very well.”*

— Metro reporter, 32, metro newspaper

*“With 50 years in this business, I see ethics at a point where an old graybeard editor can point with pride and satisfaction that our profession endures.”*

— Editor, 70, small newspaper

Many others say ethics are on a downward spiral:

*“I believe most newsrooms’ standards are strict enough to maintain a public appearance of impartiality and high-minded ethics. Yet those standards are bent when they prohibit efficient news-gathering, interfere with making money or might rob top editors of luxury box deals or five-star dinners.”*

— Metro reporter, 36, midsize newspaper

*“We have floating rules and standards. Very little is made clear except in retrospect ... I’m not happy about the state of ethics at newspapers, and our paper is a good example.”*

— Metro editor, 46, metro newspaper

*“Ethics? Ha! Ethics is dead.”*

— Features reporter, 42, metro newspaper

Their assessments of the overall state of ethics and standards in the industry may differ, but some specific concerns were raised with almost universal regularity.

If these 904 newsroom professionals are to be believed — and there is no reason to think they should not be — some troubling things are going on.

Putrefaction most assuredly has not set in. But there are worrisome soft spots.

### **Some troubling things**

The majority of those surveyed said most of their co-workers are honorable people who wish to do the right thing. But at the same time, there was a strong undercurrent of concern that society and newsrooms are at a point that can contort personal and journalistic integrity and make fuzzy the lines between what’s acceptable and what’s not. As many journalists see it, the increased focus on the bottom line; competition from many fronts; and reduced communication, guidance and oversight by frazzled editors are contributing to a veritable Petri dish of some misguided or unguided newsroom behavior.

Newspapers historically have been fairly blind to some of the breaches performed by their own, and this tradition continues, according to survey participants. Hundreds of respondents said they had personal knowledge of not rampant but some incidents of:

- Acceptance of expensive freebies
- Fabricated sources and quotes
- Cozy relationships between reporters and sources (and, especially, top editors and publishers with the business community)
- Inappropriate or illegal behavior in public by reporters.

### **How This Study was Conducted**

A multiple-choice paper questionnaire, with space for comments, was distributed to word professionals in 20 newsrooms in 11 states during December 1999 and January 2000. The newspapers were of varying sizes, both chain-owned and independents. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

The study explored newsroom standards, defined by the researcher as the understood level of acceptance relating to behaviors such as stealing company property, sexual harassment, habitual absenteeism or general incompetence, and journalism ethics, which included plagiarism, behavior toward sources, gifts and favors, modifying quotes and similar matters.

(See Appendix I for details.)

While all the newspapers in this survey have tacit or written rules about most of those behaviors, the policies are erratically applied and enforced, according to respondents. Only two of the 20 newspapers in this study had fired a staffer for an ethics or standards infraction in the past five years. And less severe disciplinary action is meted out stingily, participants said. This, they suggested, amounts to silent acceptance of bad behavior, and seems likely to cultivate more of the same. Concern over endorsing and ultimately perpetuating unacceptable behavior through laxity was, in fact, a primary worry expressed by respondents in this survey.

*“The young people aren’t getting any instruction at all when they come into the newsroom. And the senior people here who do know the rules know there aren’t ever any consequences for breaking them.”*

— Reporter, 43, metro newspaper

One reporter at a Midwestern metro cleanly articulated the overall sentiments of dozens in this study when he wrote, “It would be alarmist and premature to say that we are walking a path straight to hell. But we are skirting the edge of being in jeopardy. Unless we pay attention to business and put our collective houses in order, we will find ourselves in a few years struggling to reclaim a lot of things we never should have lost: Readers, credibility and an understood and appreciated place in the community.”

### **Out of control?**

It is, then, not dire distress that many of the news folks in this study seem to feel, but rather a disquieting sense that in some ways — many of them vague, others quite defined — things are beginning to get out of hand. For some, the concern tracks to very specific infractions that rattle the foundation of what has been the presumed code for decades:

*“Individuals sometimes give lip service to ethics but take a lot of advantage of the gray areas, like freebies and socializing with sources.”*

— Metro reporter, 31, small newspaper

*“The reporting and editing standards are largely understood at this paper, (but) there are no ethics/standards when it comes to personal behavior ... It’s the gifts, the associations and the personal behavior that are open to question.”*

— Metro reporter, 49, metro newspaper

*“In my department alone, we have a reporter who was dating a source, a columnist who we all know makes up ‘unnamed sources’ for her columns, and at least one reporter who is so sloppy and inaccurate it’s an embarrassment.”*

— Features reporter, 33, midsize newspaper

For some participants, the concerns were more philosophical: a growing apprehension that newspapers may be losing track of the mission and responsibilities that earned them First Amendment protection.

*“Newspapers are businesses, and we’ve accepted that more, but it’s also dangerous....*

*Papers must still be watchdogs and teach civics and cover things that are important, albeit not particularly interesting to a lot of our customers.*

*We have to be leaders in addition to being businesses.*

*That leadership ethic is failing today. And as we begin to think of ourselves more as entertainers than journalists, we’re a lot less diligent about making sure we report and act and publish in ways that we put our principles and our credibility first.”*

— Features editor, 30, midsize newspaper

*“The ethical void in journalism today may stem from the cut-throat competitive nature of the business, the get-it-first-at-all-cost mentality rampant in the profession.*

*I would rather see the emphasis placed on getting it right. Sometimes we lose track of the most fundamental element of our profession.”*

— Sports reporter, 29, small newspaper

*“We no longer have the tyrants watching over us, threatening us.*

*... We seem to have forgotten that to be free means you also have to be responsible, which means following a code of conduct.”*

— Copy editor, 41, midsize newspaper

Whatever their concerns, most (though certainly not all) participants are eager for more discussion, deeper understanding and more specificity of their own newsroom policies, as well as more guidance on how to contend with the slushier territory through which every reporter and editor must sometimes walk.

*“Things have changed drastically in not only our business in the last decade but throughout our society.... There are more gray areas. Anything that can be done to better define what the rules are will be beneficial.”*

— Assigning editor, 32, metro newspaper



# Sins of the Present, Fears of the Future

CHAPTER ONE

*An overview*

**T**HE topic of standards and ethics is, among most newspaper people, an incendiary one. The power wielded by the press is enormous, the potential for great disservice being visited upon an individual, organization or community is huge, and the need for high levels of personal and organizational integrity is massive.

No one in the business wants to believe journalistic misdeeds — large or small — are inching toward widespread, so most cling vehemently (and some quite defensively) to the belief that whatever bad or borderline behavior, lack of guidance, and mixed or confused messages they have experienced are limited to their own newsrooms.

This, however, does not appear to be the case. From the 20 papers involved in this study, some clear patterns emerged. Among them:

■ There is much confusion about what is acceptable behavior and what is not. Virtually everyone would accept that plagiarism is bad, but there are some decidedly gray areas. What about changing/cleaning up quotes — how much is too much? And what is the proper level of friendliness versus distance with sources? What sorts of gifts are OK to accept? And when is it necessary to inform supervisors about an intimate relationship with a source? The shifting tides of journalism practice evidently have made some previously verboten behaviors relatively commonplace in many newsrooms — often, it appears, without full knowledge of top editors. In the absence of universally applied industry codes or newsroom-specific guidelines, news professionals are left to call their own shots, and some study participants are not especially comfortable with some of the shots their colleagues are calling.

*“People are more or less aware of the big issues — making up quotes or sources, and some of the things that might be regarded as conflicts of interest — but they often have a tough time putting some of the daily smaller gray-area things into their work lives, such as sources’ requests to keep certain information confidential.”*

— News desk supervisor, 33, midsize newspaper

■ They don’t always know the rules of their own newsrooms. In the absence of much precision from the top, they’re left to frame them through second- or third-hand information gleaned from co-workers, or they divine them by blending what they learned in J school with what they assume to be practiced at other newspapers and what they see happening in their own newsrooms.

*“If the managing editor or the editor have any strong opinions about the way things should be done or any strong convictions about things that should not be done, I don’t know about them. My boss is younger and has a lot less experience than I do. The only thing he has ever said is ‘use your best judgment.’”*

— State reporter, 34, midsize paper

*“Ethical rules, if they actually exist with any degree of clarity and consistency in someone’s head, are not made clear. They only become clear when someone is reprimanded or fired. People are rarely fired.”*

— Features reporter, 48, metro newspaper

*“Rules are inconsistent, constantly shifting and vague.”*

— Metro reporter, 40, midsize paper

- Even in newsrooms where rules are fairly well communicated, application is uneven. And the consequences for breaking them often depend on the identity and stature of the individual who did the breaking.

*“Our newsroom sends mixed messages, such as the fact that some people can get away with inappropriate conduct or personal relationships with sources, but others would be talked to or reprimanded.”*

— Business reporter, 34, metro newspaper

*“We have double, triple and quadruple standards.”*

— Features reporter, 50, small newspaper

- Freebie acceptance is widespread, blatant and widely ignored by management. This was the most combustible hot button among study participants. Only 43 percent said freebie acceptance could lead to firing at their newspapers; 40 percent said it wouldn’t even lead to lesser reprimand. The matter of gifts and favors is so ambiguously addressed by top management that questionable behavior is quite common, participants said.

*“Our paper has a well-known marketing columnist who constantly receives gifts such as booze, candy and tickets to top sporting events, yet he is never admonished. It seems as long as his column generates ad money, ethics takes a back seat.”*

— Metro reporter, 40, metro newspaper

*“Reporters and editors accept sports tickets, meals and other considerations made available only because they are journalists.”*

— Metro editor, metro newspaper

*“Our food writer brags openly and readily invites guests to see his wine cellar, built expressly because he needed a place to store the bottles of wine from vineyards he writes about.”*

— Reporter, metro newspaper

## New problems coming

Many of the types — and perhaps even the level — of infractions study participants say exist today have likely existed for some time. But there is a grave sense among the ranks that new problems are coming to the fore that require that newsrooms articulate existing policies in preparation for the onslaught of emerging problems on five different fronts:

**1. Increasing attention to the bottom line.** This trend is prompting a cavalcade of decisions that not only don't support good journalism, but in many ways threaten or weaken it. Indeed, the real ethical dilemmas of the present and future are taking root not in the newsrooms but in the boardrooms, many suggested.

*“The biggest problem with ethics for newspapers deals not with individual reporters’ actions but the setting of priorities by top executives who are protecting the sacred cows, key advertisers and their own political or social agendas. Why do so few newspapers write about crooked car dealers, discriminatory grocers or greedy retailers? Advertising \$\$\$.* Ethics discussions that ignore this biggest of credibility problems miss the point. Reporters are not being bought. Their bosses’ bosses are.”

— Metro reporter, 37, metro newspaper

*“Reporters are not being bought.  
Their bosses’ bosses are.”*

— Reporter, metro newspaper

*“The problem with journalism today is that too much of it is  
in [the] control of the accountants and lawyers.”*

— Metro editor, 46, small newspaper

**2. An out-of-whack obsession with political correctness.** The 1990s emphasis on being kind and respectful to all, while inarguably noble and right, has now reached the point, many survey participants said, where story selection is stilted, discussions that should take place do not, and stories that would upset or offend any group of people — even stories that deserve attention — are purposefully ignored in the interest of social harmony.

*“Political correctness is often confused with ethics. In fact, the former  
sometimes stands in the way of the latter.”*

— Business reporter, 38, from a metro newspaper

*“We take too much care not to offend subjects/sources. Our newsroom tends to avoid all stories that might put a particular class, religion, ethnicity or gender in a bad light. While I buy into applying a truckload of sensitivity to every story we write, I think we are not doing the best by our communities or our profession when we studiously avoid reporting or refuse to print information that could reflect badly on one segment of the population.”*

— Metro reporter, 45, metro newspaper

**3. The potentially injurious impact of new technologies.** Some of the new and emerging information-gathering products and services may be inappropriately (and sometimes unethically) utilized because they have been insufficiently discussed and analyzed in newsrooms.

*“There are a lot of fuzzy areas that need more discussion, including e-mail. Should we accept e-mail quotes and do we present them in the newspaper as if they had been spoken as opposed to written? If we somehow come into a printout or copy of e-mail correspondence, is it appropriate for us to use [it], and how do we distinguish proper use from improper use?”*

— Business reporter, 34, metro newspaper

*“Plagiarism is becoming more difficult to police and easier to perform, thanks to the Internet. It is, therefore becoming more common. This is a clear no-no that should be punished, and I hope it will be. But then the lines blur. For example, we often quote other publications when we are writing news stories. It’s a time-honored tradition. But what about when we pull information off the Internet, and attribute that without confirming its veracity, just as we would if we were quoting the Wall Street Journal? I think all of us do that more and more, even though we have serious doubts about the strength of Internet information. So we’re regularly publishing information about which we have serious doubts, and we feel more or less OK about doing it because we’re attributing it to someone else. I don’t know, feels pretty slimy to me.”*

— Metro editor, 28, metro newspaper

Moreover, newspapers’ own Internet offerings are a source of worry among some journalists.

*“I think online extensions of newspapers jeopardize the industry’s integrity. There’s not the same commitment, I don’t think, to depth, consistency and clear ethical lines.”*

— Senior editor, 46, metro newspaper

**4. The burgeoning phenomenon of newspaper collaborations with other organizations.** Again there is the concern that perhaps all this synergy has progressed too fast and with too little forethought.

*“I think the slippery slope for journalists today is our ties — through parent companies — with other media, and with the organizations we cover.”*

— Features reporter, 46, metro newspaper

**5. The impact and influence of other media.** There are now far more information providers, and their numbers and popularity no longer can be discounted or pooh-poohed by newspaper people, who have long insisted they were the only “serious” journalists. The public’s growing tendency to lump together all information providers, facilitated by newspapers’ increasing tendency to follow the pack rather than distinguishing themselves, is diluting and adulterating newspapers’ position in society, many study participants fear.

*“By far the most serious ethical crisis in journalism today is the trend to place competition above fairness and accuracy, the trend in which being fast is more important than being right, and that it’s OK to go with anything that’s already ‘out there’. This allows the supermarket tabloids and Matt Drudge types to set the agenda, and it’s a betrayal of the public trust every time it happens.”*

— Features copy editor, 41, metro newspaper

*“Newspapers continue to be the standard-bearers for all of journalism ethics. Sadly, many have stumbled because rapid growing broadcast and Web fields have blurred some of the bounds. Many principles, including naming of sources and representing facts rather than editorializing in reporting, have been watered down to the degree that mistrust of the media is perfectly justifiable.”*

— Copy editor, 26, midsize paper

# Whence Cometh THE WORD

CHAPTER TWO

**T**IME was when a newspaper's values, ethics and standards were passed from old-timer to newcomer with unmistakable clarity. One at a time, when the situation called for it, "A Rule" was handed down — most often by a crusty city editor — with all the precision and authority of a writer who has chosen this one time to speak.

The information imparted may or may not have been entirely accurate or even, in some cases, rigorously ethical. But it was clear and it was consistent.

And generations of journalists learned and kept their professional footing this way, determined to avoid a misstep if for no other reason than to avoid the wrath of The Rules Sharer.

At least this is how most baby-boomer newspaper people remember it. As do their predecessors.

Much of this shared group memory may be myth. And few would suggest that the period 20, 30 or 40 years ago represents The Golden Age of Ethical Newspapering. Still, there was a pretty clear sense about what was acceptable and what was not, and editors displayed very little aversion to thoroughly chewing out anyone guilty of the latter.

It probably would not be accurate to say there is less interest these days in exemplary standards and ethics. But it probably would be accurate to say that ethics instruction is mostly a catch-as-catch-can practice in most newsrooms. Crammed in as time allows between focus groups, new-media initiatives and special-section development, standards and ethics are discussed, imparted and upheld by managers in most newsrooms in what can only be described as a haphazard fashion.

At least that's how many in this research project see it.

*"Discussions are too often limited to senior editors for privacy reasons. Reporters have little indication of the ongoing ethics discussions among us. That can easily lead to a lack of understanding of how seriously we take the matter of ethical standards, or even what we regard as acceptable and unacceptable."*

— Features editor, 48, metro paper

*"Our managers seem to rely on everyone to do the right things without any kind of clear rules."*

— State news editor, 40something, metro paper

*"I think our management is quick to use lofty words about ethics but there seems to be little true interest in discussing, then insisting upon them and adhering to them, just as there is little interest in doing what is necessary to achieve high standards in journalism. In other words, we talk a good game."*

— Metro editor, 46, metro newspaper

## **Disconnect between managers, staff**

The impact of this lack of attention, irregular communication and/or hasty inner-sanctum discussion is clear from the results of this study.

- Although 74 percent of the participants described the standards and ethics code at their newspapers as “appropriately strict” or “appropriately pliable,” more than half (59 percent) who gave those answers noted that the code “contains huge black holes,” is “extremely fluid,” “mysterious in many ways,” “erratically enforced” or “unevenly applied.”
- Although 68 percent said they believe they have a clear understanding of their newspaper’s ethics policies, few could say with any degree of accuracy what breaches of standards or ethics would result in a reprimand or firing. In fact, at virtually every newspaper in the study, a majority of respondents thought they would not be reprimanded or fired for many of the breaches that the editor said would lead to disciplinary action.
- Although 63 percent said they had discussed journalism integrity or ethics with a manager in the past six months — either in a general sense or in relation to a specific story — 12 percent don’t recall ever having had such a discussion.
- Although 51 percent said they had attended a seminar or internal session on newsroom standards and ethics, when we filter out those at Gannett — which in 1999 mandated ethics training for all newsroom employees — the figure dropped to 43 percent.

Newspaper employees are operating under less than clearly articulated, regularly discussed and evenly applied codes of standards and ethics.

Part of the problem may be that there is usually no central disseminator of standards and ethics information and guidance — no one who takes or is assigned the responsibility for communicating, monitoring and maintaining behavior in newsrooms.

And whatever contribution top editors are making to that end, it apparently does not involve making pronouncements heard by one and all.

When asked “from whom have you learned the bulk of your accumulated knowledge about your newspaper’s standard and ethics?” 10 percent answered “the managing editor,” 10.5 percent said “the top editor,” 18 percent “my immediate supervisor, 15 percent “former bosses” and 29 percent “my peers.”

The remaining 17.5 percent said “other,” which they identified as SPJ guidelines, the newspaper’s lawyers, their newspaper’s printed code, life experience, journalism school or their own sense of right and wrong.

## **Young look to peers**

Of particular interest in these numbers is the fact that of those who said they learned from immediate supervisors or former bosses, 75 percent were 40 or

older. And 59 percent of journalists 30 and under identified “my peers” as their chief source of information. At metro papers, the percent of 30-and-under journalists employed who identified “my peers” soared to 68 percent.

Meanwhile, line editors, assigning editors, senior editors, department heads and other managers were three times more likely than reporters and copy editors to name the managing editor, top editor or immediate supervisor as their primary source of ethics and standards information.

The interpretation is obvious: Today’s managing editors and editors are talking standards and ethics mostly or only with the supervisory ranks, and supervisors do not seem to be carrying the message any farther.

Thus, much of the day-to-day discussion and decision-making on standards and ethics is happening at much lower levels — copy editor to copy editor and reporter to reporter.

It must be noted that there is nothing inherently wrong with learning from one’s peers. It’s a time-honored tradition that has great merit. But when nearly one-third of the staff makes that claim, and more than half of the youngest, least experienced do, there is enormous potential for miscalls, and, ultimately, group-supported entrenchment of practices about which top management knows nothing.

*Nearly 60 percent of journalists 30 and under identified “my peers” as their chief source of [ethics] information.*

*“Upper management expects reporters to behave ethically, but many reporters are too young to know the rules and seem to be moving ahead without developing a framework on which solid journalism careers are or should be built.”*

— Metro editor, 38, midsize paper

Perhaps worse, there is great potential for those in the lower echelons, absent any words of guidance from above, to believe they are the only ones in the organization who concern themselves with journalism ethics and standards. And this sentiment was expressed elsewhere in this survey.

It must also be noted that there is nothing wrong with relying heavily on the principles learned in journalism school. Many practicing journalists in this study say they are doing exactly that.

*“Everything I know about ethics I learned in journalism school.”*

— Metro reporter, 51, metro paper

But although J school instruction can form an important knowledge base, no learning institution can prepare a student for every eventuality professional life will present. Moreover, every organization in every line of work must detail, discuss, monitor and uphold the precepts it holds important if it expects them to be taken seriously by employees.

Newsroom managers who assume young journalists arrive at their doors imbued with a deep understanding of how to approach their jobs in the most honorable manner possible are deluding themselves, many survey participants said.

*“I think journalism schools don’t teach enough about ethics. In our newsroom I see youngsters with no firm grounding in ethics. Also, more and more journalists don’t even go to journalism school. I think expecting them to magically pick it up on Day 1 of the job is dangerous.”*

— National/foreign editor, metro paper

In any event, whether they’re newcomers or old-timers, many reporters and middle managers expressed great eagerness for more discussion.

*“Discussion of ethics should become a monthly staple at all newspapers.”*

— Copy editor, 48, midsize newspaper

*“The thing that concerns me most is that I don’t know if we have a formal ethics policy or not, and I’ve been here for 16 years.”*

— Metro reporter, midsize newspaper

*“I’m making calls every day based on my gut rather than any clear signal from above. I like to think I’m right most of the time, but to be truthful, there are times when I probably am not.”*

— Assistant city editor, 34, midsize paper

It is clear that employees are attempting, for the most part, to fill in the gaps and rise to the occasion each day.

It also is clear that some help from the top would be welcome, and would probably go far in reducing questionable or rogue behavior.

*“In general I think most journalists form their own ethical guidelines based on experience and common sense. But all must be prepared to follow their company’s rules — if they know what the rules are.”*

— Business reporter, 34, metro paper

*“My impression is that ethics are chiefly a matter of common sense. The lines for me have always been unclear. I follow my own moral compass.”*

— Features reporter, 35, midsize newspaper

*“There is greater sensitivity about ethical issues than in the past, but with no written policies or guidelines and rare seminars or rap sessions to air and discuss issues, they are resolved on a case-by-case basis and not communicated to the rest of the staff.*

*We could learn from one another, but don’t.”*

— Features editor, 47, metro newspaper.

# Bad Apples or Poor Guidance?

CHAPTER THREE



REPORTERS and editors are human. They are, therefore, vulnerable to the same kinds of failings as all other human beings.

Whatever suspicion we might have had that some less-than-honorable behavior might go on in newsrooms was confirmed by the respondents in this survey.

Some 64 percent offered detailed examples of dubious reporter behavior at their papers, although they were not specifically asked to do so, and half of them seemed to have transpired with the complicity of editors. Among examples cited:

*“Most breaches are those of laxity. I have worked with reporters who were widely known to make things up, and editors looked the other way for far longer than was seemly because the stories were exciting. My experience is that that kind of behavior and pressure is greater in a highly competitive environment.”*

— Features reporter, metro newspaper

*“A sports columnist was arrested for DWI and leaving the scene of an accident — his second major public faux pas in 10 years and still writes for the paper. An editor and reporter left in the word ‘fuck’ in a story and kept their jobs.”*

— Copy editor, metro newspaper

*“I can’t speak for other papers, but here we give lip service to ethics, and not much of that until recently. Petty graft that compromised objectivity and other improper activities have long been winked at. ... Punishments for many infractions would depend upon who did it. e.g.: Accepting money or gifts is supposedly a no-no, but a top editor was caught publicly doing just that and his actions were defended.”*

— Columnist, metro newspaper

*“Stories abound about free travel and wine. Our editorial page editor, for example, accepted a private plane ride to a baseball game from the owner of our local professional team, who he routinely writes about.”*

— Business reporter, metro paper

*“A lot of staffers are making money and becoming well-known through radio and TV, based on their coverage of certain areas. A lot of times they’re revealing information that has yet to be in the paper, and they’re giving opinions, something that we would never allow them to do in print.”*

— Metro editor, midsize paper

*“Supervisors were unaware of, or chose to ignore (I believe it is the latter) one reporter’s behavior during election she was covering. She told her sources repeatedly, ‘I am a whore. I hate politics, I just do it for the money.’ ... She also repeatedly said she might go to work for one of the candidates if he won. And, finally, she shared information that one party told her in confidence with another party.”*

— Metro reporter, small newspaper

Sometimes, according to study participants, supervisors are not merely complicit but, in fact, are the very source of questionable practice. Among examples cited:

*“An editor here once changed a story about an art exhibit to identify a piece of art as ‘Hitler’s favorite painting.’ This was done without the reporter’s knowledge and there was no truth to that statement. She should have been fired, but was not.”*

— Copy editor, metro paper

*“We had one ethics training session here in the last year, and it barely scratched the surface. Reporters — most of them — are hungry for more. But we never seem to have the time for it. In recent weeks, even after the session we had over the summer, I had an editor suggest what I consider to be unethical reporting practices. I called him on it.*

*But it just shows we’re not all on the same page.”*

— Metro reporter, metro paper

*“Our sports editor snaps up freebies like there’s no tomorrow. At several play-off games he would go in with all the credentials for his staff, pick up all the freebies and keep them all himself. His staff was outraged — not because the boss was flagrantly hauling in merchandise, but simply because they didn’t get any of the graft themselves.”*

— Reporter, metro newspaper

Some of these — if accurately portrayed — are clearly ethical lapses.

Some are behaviors that are not ethical breaches in the pure sense, but are behaviors that reflect badly on the newspaper and, in the end, perhaps, on the public perception of the industry as a whole.

It must be pointed out that the examples given are not occurring in every newsroom every day. Indeed, they were generally presented as worst-case examples that stuck in the minds of the respondents because they are so extreme.

Still, they are the very sorts of things that undermine public confidence, as well as employee confidence in the organization. And study participants offered them to illustrate the degree to which bad behaviors exist — and often go unpunished — in their newsrooms.

### **Scant discipline**

Honor, integrity and exemplary standards are lofty ideals, and ones to which practically all journalists would say they subscribe. Most newspaper people no doubt would say, for example, that plagiarizing, fabricating quotes or sources, or accepting an expensive gift from a source are ethically unacceptable.

Belief in certain principles, however, and personal and organizational vehemence in upholding such principles can be two different things. And the way

many study participants see it, newsrooms can be pretty lax on the enforcement side.

That is a problem because of the way Americans frame their thinking and expectations. Whether we like it or not, ours is a society in which consequences can affect behavior.

There always will be a few people who break rules even in the face of severe consequences, just as there always will be a few people who display uncommonly high personal and professional standards even in the absence of known consequences. But most form their daily operating practices and make dozens of choices a day based on not only their understanding of the rules but also their sense of the consequences for breaking them.

And the overwhelming majority of participants in this survey believe there is very little for which an employee in their newsroom would be disciplined.

It is important to state the obvious at this point: It is practically impossible to say with any degree of absoluteness which newsroom behaviors would or should always be met with a reprimand or on-the-spot employment termination. Much would depend on the circumstances. Is this a first offense? Was it an infraction of ignorance or of blatant disregard for the standards? Did situational circumstances contribute to an unwise choice? Is the violator contrite or boldly unapologetic?

Accepting, however, that a full hearing must occur, and that progressive discipline is the norm in most organizations, most of the respondents in this study said repercussions are rare.

## Behaviour/Ethics Responses

### Would a news staffer at your newspaper be reprimanded for the following?

	Yes	No	Not Sure
Uttering or writing a racial slur	79%	15%	6%
Uttering or writing a gender slur	68%	26%	6%
Stealing company property	63%	26%	6%
Becoming intimately involved with a source	51%	42%	7%
Plagiarizing a paragraph from another publication	70%	24%	6%
Fabricating a quote	66%	28%	6%
Modifying or changing a quote	44%	50%	6%
Consistently misspelling names and addresses in stories	62%	32%	6%
Fabricating a source	63%	31%	6%
Withholding information from a story at a source's request without informing a supervisor	46%	48%	6%
Writing about an organization with which one has a personal connection	56%	37%	7%
Failing to inform the news desk about a personal or familial relationship with someone who has suddenly become a news topic	50%	44%	6%
Becoming intimately involved with a supervisor or subordinate	30%	63%	7%
Sexually harassing a co-worker	72%	22%	6%
Refusing to write a story requested by the publisher	32%	62%	6%
Failing to report to work repeatedly	62%	32%	6%
Accepting money or gifts from sources	60%	33%	7%
Consistently writing stories that are inaccurate or nonsensical	56%	37%	7%
Consistently showing up for work drunk or on drugs	64%	30%	6%

### Would a staffer be fired in your newsroom for the following?

	Yes	No	Not Sure
Uttering or writing a racial slur	25%	65%	10%
Uttering or writing a gender slur	18%	72%	10%
Stealing company property	69%	21%	10%
Becoming intimately involved with a source	13%	78%	9%
Plagiarizing a paragraph from another publication	44%	46%	10%
Fabricating a quote	47%	43%	10%
Modifying or changing a quote	9%	81%	10%
Consistently misspelling names in stories	12%	78%	10%
Fabricating a source	63%	27%	10%
Withholding information from a story at a source's request without informing a supervisor	8%	81%	11%
Writing about an organization with which one has a personal connection	12%	77%	11%
Failing to inform the news desk about a personal or familial relationship with someone who has suddenly become a news topic	7%	82%	11%
Becoming intimately involved with a supervisor or subordinate	10%	80%	10%
Sexually harassing a co-worker	59%	32%	9%
Refusing to write a story requested by the publisher	15%	75%	10%
Failing to report to work repeatedly	61%	29%	10%
Accepting money or gifts from sources	43%	47%	10%
Consistently writing stories that are inaccurate or nonsensical	46%	44%	10%
Repeatedly showing up for work drunk or on drugs	73%	18%	9%

## **Few firings over ethics**

The behaviors that are most likely to lead to firing are, in the minds of most participants, almost exclusively universally understood workplace infractions — stealing company property, for example — rather than journalism ethics, such as fabricating a quote or accepting gifts from a source.

When asked if certain behaviors could cause a staffer in their newsroom to be fired, five of 19 circumstances garnered more than 50 percent “yes” responses. These are (in descending order):

- Repeatedly showing up for work drunk or on drugs
- Stealing company property
- Fabricating a source
- Failing repeatedly to report to work
- Sexually harassing a co-worker

Very few respondents (between 7 percent and 13 percent) said the following would cause someone to be fired:

- Becoming intimately involved with a source
- Consistently misspelling names in stories
- Writing about an organization with which they have a personal connection
- Becoming intimately involved with a supervisor or subordinate
- Changing or modifying a quote
- Withholding information from a story at a source’s request without discussion with a supervisor
- Failing to tell the news desk about a personal relationship with someone who made news.

## **Reprimands more common**

The respondents said a much broader constellation would lead to a reprimand (versus firing) at their newsrooms. But again, they seem more clear about bad workplace behaviors than ethical breaches.

At least half said a staffer would likely be reprimanded at their newspapers for: (in descending order of the percentage who answered “yes”)

- Uttering or writing a racial slur
- Sexually harassing a co-worker
- Plagiarizing a paragraph from another publication
- Uttering or writing a gender slur
- Fabricating a quote
- Consistently showing up for work drunk or on drugs
- Stealing company property

- Fabricating a source
- Consistently misspelling names and addresses in stories
- Repeatedly failing to report to work
- Accepting money or gifts from sources
- Consistently writing stories that are inaccurate or nonsensical
- Writing about an organization with a personal connection
- Intimate involvement with a source
- Failing to tell the news desk about a personal relationship with someone who is news.

Fewer than one-half thought withholding information at a source's request, becoming intimately involved with a supervisor or subordinate, modifying or changing a quote or refusing to write a story requested by the publisher would lead to a reprimand.

### **What's important and what isn't**

Some points of illumination can be derived from the numbers:

- Race and gender issues.

The strength in numbers relating to slurs about gender or race and to sexual harassment illustrates one thing with great certainty: The degree of focus top management levels on an issue can have a decided impact on employee clarity. Twenty-five years ago, little organizational attention was paid to these three matters. And none would have been likely to show up among behaviors most likely to lead to a reprimand.

Since then most newspapers have taken some fairly strong stances. There were training sessions, posted warnings, and often strict and swift sanctions for abusers. It is not coincidental that these are now regarded by the majority as punishable behaviors.

- Intimate involvement with a supervisor or subordinate.

This is widely regarded as a non-issue. Only 30 percent believe such behavior could lead to a reprimand, and only 10 percent think it would be a fireable offense. This may be a situation where lack of discussion and/or consequences has led to a false belief among employees that this behavior is acceptable, because two-thirds of the editors in this study said involvement with a supervisor or subordinate is, in fact, grounds for discipline.

- Modifying quotes.

This too is seen by many as a non-issue. It could be a case of changing mores, because 60 percent of the editors said it is a matter of practical efficiency to give reporters leeway to make minor changes to quotes without flagging a supervisor. The other 40 percent, however, take the position that any

quote modification without discussion/approval is a dangerous road to walk, as it opens the door to too broad and inappropriate overhauls of sources' quotes.

■ Withholding information from a story without telling a supervisor.

This evidently is not given much attention at newspapers either. Only 45 percent said it could lead to a reprimand. This may be an area where reporters have been inclined to inch into new territory absent any directives or repercussions to dissuade them, because 90 percent of the editors in the survey said this is a punishable offense.

■ Publisher power.

Most staffers believe that even if publishers are exerting more pressure on newsrooms, individual journalistic sanctity is intact. Few believe a reporter could be reprimanded or fired for refusing to do a story requested by the publisher.

■ Some “don't know.”

A small minority of newsroom professionals seem to have no idea where their newsrooms stand on any of these matters. A varying cluster ranging from 6 percent to 10 percent did not venture a guess on each of the behaviors presented.

### **Not on the same page**

The majority responses of participants about the 19 behaviors give strong indications where the nation's journalists believe newsrooms stand on various issues. Clearly there is a feeling among a significant number of journalists that many behaviors do not lead to reprimand (even behaviors most newspeople would probably identify as counter to the profession's tradition and culture). Equally notable: Even the three behaviors that the largest percentage of participants identified as most likely to lead to reprimand are regarded by a significant number — approaching one-quarter — as not likely to result in a reprimand.

However, what may be even more telling than the overall responses of nearly 1,000 journalists is the degree to which top management and the rank and file in each newsroom disagree about whether behaviors are likely to result in a reprimand or firing.

At every paper in this survey in which the top editor completed the questionnaire, there was a marked difference between what the editor regarded as punishable or fireable offenses and what the staff saw as the same. Indeed, there was agreement on no more than 11 of the 19 behaviors presented at any of the newspapers, and in some cases top management and staff agreed on as few as seven.

It would be worthwhile to examine a couple of papers — quite typical in their response patterns — to explore this point.

## Results from a Midwestern Metro Newspaper

Would a news staffer at your newspaper be reprimanded for the following?

	Editor Says		Staff Says	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Uttering or writing a racial slur	x		78%	17%
Uttering or writing a gender slur	x		62%	34%
Stealing company property	x		64%	32%
Becoming intimately involved with a source	x		34%	64%
Plagiarizing a paragraph from another publication	x		87%	11%
Fabricating a quote	x		71%	28%
Modifying or changing a quote		x	33%	66%
Consistently misspelling names or addresses in stories	x		43%	56%
Fabricating a source	x		67%	30%
Withholding information from a story at a source's request without informing a supervisor	x		26%	69%
Writing about an organization with which one has a personal connection	x		38%	57%
Failing to inform the news desk of a personal or familial relationship with someone who has become news	x		33%	63%
Becoming intimately involved with a supervisor or subordinate	x		15%	80%
Sexual harassing a co-worker	x		76%	20%
Refusing to write a story requested by the publisher	x		32%	63%
Failing to report to work repeatedly	x		58%	38%
Accepting money or gifts from sources	x		52%	45%
Consistently writing stories that are inaccurate or nonsensical	x		46%	49%
Consistently showing up for work drunk or on drugs	x		73%	23%

For each question, 1% to 5% of the respondents did not answer the question or said they did not know.

# Results from a Midwestern Metro Newspaper

## Part II

Would a staffer be fired in your newsroom for the following?

	Editor Says		Staff Says	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Uttering or writing a racial slur	x		35%	59%
Uttering or writing a gender slur		x	21%	72%
Stealing company property	x		67%	26%
Becoming intimately involved with a source		x	8%	86%
Plagiarizing a paragraph from another publication		x	22%	71%
Fabricating a quote		x	23%	74%
Modifying or changing a quote		x	1%	92%
Consistently misspelling names in stories		x	1%	91%
Fabricating a source	x		39%	55%
Withholding information from a story at a source's request without informing asupervisor		x	3%	90%
Writing about an organization with which one has a personal connection		x	6%	88%
Failing to inform the news desk about a personal or familial relationship with someone who has become a news topic		x	1%	93%
Becoming intimately involved w/ a supervisor or subordinate	x		5%	88%
Sexually harassing a co-worker	x		69%	25%
Refusing to write a story requested by the publisher		x	14%	80%
Failing to report to work repeatedly	x		50%	43%
Accepting money or gifts from sources	x		22%	71%
Consistently writing stories that are inaccurate or nonsensical		x	21%	91%
Repeatedly showing up for work drunk or on drugs		x	65%	28%

For each question, 3% to 7% of respondents did not answer the question or said they did not know the answer to the question

## **Midwest metro newspaper**

The editor of this newspaper wrote that engaging in 18 of the 19 behaviors listed on the questionnaire would be likely to result in a reprimand. He excluded “modifying or changing a quote.”

His staff is not fully aware of his positions.

Only 10 of the 19 behaviors were seen by at least half the staff as grounds for reprimand. Thus, nearly half of the behaviors the editor sees as breaches are not regarded similarly by a majority of the staff.

Moreover, even among behaviors a majority of the staff believes to be reprimandable, anywhere from 17 percent to 45 percent of the staff believe them not to be punishable offenses.

The editor listed seven behaviors as serious enough to lead to firing:

- Uttering or writing a racial slur
- Stealing company property
- Fabricating a source
- Becoming intimately involved with a supervisor or subordinate
- Sexual harassment
- Repeatedly failing to report for work
- Accepting money or gifts from sources

The majority of the staff, however, regarded only three of these behaviors as likely to bring about termination: stealing company property, sexually harassing a co-worker, and repeatedly failing to report to work.

As for the other four, only about one-third of the staff said these are fireable offenses (and only a tiny fraction — 5 percent — believe intimate involvement with a supervisor or subordinate could lead to termination in their newsroom). Interestingly, 65 percent of them believe that showing up for work drunk or on drugs repeatedly would get someone fired, although the editor did not list that as a fireable offense.

The disconnect between what the editor says he would do in certain circumstances and what the staff believes would happen in those circumstances is similar at other newspapers in this study, although the specific behaviors about which there is a difference of opinion varies from newspaper to newspaper.

The numbers at this metro newspaper seem to indicate rather convincingly that two things are happening: The editors’ standards and expectations are not being communicated, or if they are, the staff has seen no concrete evidence of consequences for failing to meet those expectations.

## **Small newspaper**

At a small Midwestern paper, there is somewhat greater agreement between editor and staff about reprimandable behaviors. (And this was consistent

## Results from a Small Midwestern Newspaper

Would a staffer at your newspaper be reprimanded for any of the following?

	Editor Says		Staff Says	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Uttering or writing a racial slur	x		78%	22%
Uttering or writing a gender slur	x		67%	33%
Stealing company property	x		62%	33%
Becoming intimately involved with a source		x	28%	72%
Plagiarizing a paragraph from another publication	x		56%	39%
Fabricating a quote	x		56%	39%
Modifying or changing a quote	x		50%	50%
Consistently misspelling names and addresses in stories	x		39%	56%
Fabricating a source	x		56%	39%
Withholding information from a story at a source's request without informing a supervisor	x		62%	33%
Writing about an organization with which one has a personal connection	x		33%	67%
Failing to inform the news desk about a personal or familial relationship with someone who has suddenly become a news topic	x		50%	50%
Becoming intimately involved with a supervisor or subordinate		x	17%	83%
Sexually harassing a co-worker	x		72%	22%
Refusing to write a story requested by the publisher		x	44%	56%
Failing to report to work repeatedly	x		44%	50%
Accepting money or gifts from sources	x		44%	50%
Consistently writing stories that are inaccurate or nonsensical	x		50%	45%
Consistently showing up for work drunk or on drugs	x		61%	33%

\* When numbers do not add up to 100%, it is because some people did not answer the question or said they didn't know the answer

# Results from a Small Midwestern Newspaper

## Part II

Would a staffer in your newsroom be fired for any of the following?

	Editor Says		Staff Says	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Uttering or writing a racial slur	x		62%	33%
Uttering or writing a gender slur	x		45%	50%
Stealing company property	x		72%	28%
Becoming intimately involved with a source		x	22%	72%
Plagiarizing a paragraph from another publication	x		50%	50%
Fabricating a quote	x		56%	44%
Modifying or changing a quote	x		22%	72%
Consistently misspelling names in stories	x		28%	72%
Fabricating a source	x		72%	28%
Withholding information from a story at a source's request without informing a supervisor	x		22%	78%
Writing about an organization with which one has a personal connection	x		22%	72%
Failing to inform the news desk about a personal or familial relationship with someone who has suddenly become a news topic	x		11%	83%
Becoming intimately involved with a supervisor or subordinate		x	11%	83%
Sexually harassing a co-worker	x		44%	66%
Refusing to write a story requested by the publisher		x	39%	56%
Failing to report to work repeatedly	x		61%	39%
Accepting money or gifts from sources	x		39%	61%
Consistently writing stories that are inaccurate or nonsensical	x		72%	28%
Repeatedly showing up for work drunk or on drugs	x		83%	17%

\*When numbers do not add up to 100%, it is because some people did not answer the questions or said they did not know the answer to the question

throughout the survey. Editors and staffs at the smaller papers were somewhat more in concert over what would lead to disciplinary action than those at midsize and larger papers.)

The editor at this newspaper wrote that 16 of the 19 behaviors listed would lead to a reprimand; the majority of the staff said 10 would.

On the matter of firing, there was considerably less agreement between the editor and the staff. The editor said 16 behaviors could very well lead to firing (depending on the severity of the offense and whether it was a first or repeat infraction). The staff, however, believes only seven could lead to a firing.

Those the editor said are fireable offenses and the staff does not believe would lead to firing were: Uttering or writing a gender slur, modifying or changing a quote, consistently misspelling names in stories, writing about an organization with which one has a personal relationship, withholding information from a story at a source's request without telling a supervisor, failing to inform the desk of a personal relationship with someone who has become news, and accepting money or gifts from sources. Also, plagiarizing is one about which there was some confusion: Half believe it would result in termination, and an equal number think it would not.

These patterns suggest this is a newsroom that understands somewhat more about the editor's standards and expectations, but it does not believe the ultimate discipline — termination — is likely for most infractions.

### **Discipline needed**

It is quite possible that most employees in most newsrooms are adhering to high standards even in the absence of known consequences. This possibility must not be discounted.

Still, in examining the response patterns of all 20 newspapers, it is obvious that newspaper journalists — as a group and as members of individual staffs — do not generally see a hard-and-fast code with attendant consequences. In behavior after behavior, only about half to two-thirds of respondents believe some form of punishment would be forthcoming.

It must be noted that the participants were not asked what they thought should happen, but rather what they thought would happen. And many of them wrote spontaneous comments indicating they believe disciplinary action is warranted for breaches of nearly all of the behaviors listed, but that it is rarely delivered or they do not believe it would be delivered.

It is perhaps for this reason that so many made reference to relying on their own personal codes rather than vague policy, group norms and disciplinary safeguards.

*“My standards have to be higher than the newspaper’s. Mine can’t be compromised.”*

— Metro reporter, 40, metro newspaper

*“I have lived the professional equivalent of a journalism nun. My rules for myself have been higher than any rules set or suggested by my paper, but they have worked for me.”*

— Reporter, 48, midsize paper

It can be hoped that they find it possible to hang onto those scruples in the face of what many of them say is a clear failure by management to monitor and take appropriate action against those who fail to live up.

But while high personal standards and integrity is always a laudable thing, it can, unfortunately, build into a sense of individual supremacy among those who regard themselves as the high-minded exception to the group’s values and morality. They begin to regard themselves as infallible. And while they will make mostly wise decisions, they are so convinced of their own rightness they seek no reality checks, and can make some unwise decisions. We have seen it happen among religious leaders, we have seen it happen in military settings, and we have seen it happen in organization after organization. There is no question but that there are some, even now, in some newsrooms who show signs of being afflicted by this:

*“I know what is ethical, no one needs to tell me. Nobody has ever questioned my integrity. If anyone did, I’d tell them to kiss my ass.”*

— Business reporter, metro newspaper

*“Bosses and organizations don’t dictate moral behavior, right-thinking individuals do it on their own. I know what for me is right and I apply that to the work I do every day without instruction from sanctimonious bosses who have no grasp of the realities of what I encounter in my work every day. I maintain standards that are above reproach.”*

— Projects reporter, metro newspaper



# Days of Wine and Roses and Sports Tickets

CHAPTER FOUR

**T**HE matter of how to contend with free (generally unsolicited) items, favors, lunches, products for review and cool seats at great events — long the source of ethical discussion — remains at most newspapers today wholly unresolved at worst, cloudy at best.

It can be an agonizingly complex issue, one about which newspaper people appear to be quite conflicted. Indeed, no other matter was more written about in the open-ended part of this questionnaire. Two-thirds of those who filled in the essay part made some reference to the freebie policy at their own newspaper. Most of it was not at all pretty.

A fundamental precept of journalism, and one to which virtually everyone in the survey would no doubt subscribe, is that a reporter or editor does not accept gifts or money in exchange for specified coverage (or non-coverage).

But few gifts, offers and favors fall into that clear a quid pro quo. The rest is gray area.

Although most newspaper journalists in this study seem to take a dim view of accepting graft — particularly when it is others who are doing the accepting — their definitions of what qualifies as an inappropriate gift or favor and what doesn't are quite varied. Acceptance of a gift or favor, many said, is highly situational, depending on the value of the item, whether it came from a large faceless company or a well-known source, the intent behind the offering (perhaps a sincere thank-you with no strings attached), and the circumstances under which the offering was made (refusal could offend the giver).

Only one newspaper involved in this survey seems to have a policy clear-cut enough to ensure that breaches — intended or otherwise — are minimized. At the rest, the degree to which the policy is left open to individual interpretation leaves most journalists squeamish ... and a few quite happy.

*“I think much attention relating to ethics has been given to or is reserved for The Big Deals — lying, plagiarizing or stealing, harassment. But much of my concern is day-to-day — how to deal with the gift baskets, CDs and events passes. There is not a clear standard for the little things.”*

— Features editor, small newspaper

*“I got a very small bouquet the other day from an organization about which I had written a little story, and I kept it. To do otherwise would have been rude, and it fell under our guidelines, which is you can't keep a gift worth more than \$10. So I was in the clear.”*

— Metro reporter, midsize newspaper

*“Accepting tickets to a concert when the preview story has already run has different ramifications, I think, than something that may influence the outcome of the story. That's my opinion, and I haven't been told differently.”*

— Features editor, small newspaper

*“When I was covering city hall, I never accepted so much as a cup of coffee. Now I write mostly profiles, and sometimes after they run, the people I profile will send me a gift. I keep them because there’s no way these people I write about could be considered sources, and it would be wrong to reject a sincere gesture.”*

— Reporter, midsize newspaper

Once in awhile the ethical conundrum is either accept an expensive meal, lodging or a ticket to an event or go without the story, because many papers will not reimburse for big-ticket expenditures. And sometimes reporters must be in upscale environs to optimize the possibility of contact with pivotal sources. At least, that’s how some of them see it.

*“Newsroom cheapness is a barrier to ethical behavior.”*

— Features editor, metro newspaper

And in some cases, freebies are regarded by poorly paid reporters as life-enhancing perks.

*“I think most of us have more personal integrity than they give us credit for. But then again, we are so poorly paid and treated that for some there is some appeal in accepting some of these offerings.”*

— Reporter, 40, small newspaper

Many participants in this project found the day-to-day rationalizations troubling. And, for good cause. For although there will always be a few people in any group who hold steadfastly to personal practices that are higher than those of their colleagues, most in group settings eventually drop to the group’s behavioral water level. These individuals may continue to decry the most obvious examples of bad behavior, but they are incrementally and inevitably mirroring the group norm. A couple of the reporters in this study acknowledged as much.

*“We have a gift-of-nominal-value rule at our place. When we first enacted it, about 10 years ago, we could accept gifts of \$10 or less in value and the rest had to be returned or given away. After a few years, because of inflation, I guess, because I don’t think there was any official modification to the original rule, we all began referring to the cutoff as a \$15 cutoff. Now I think it’s \$20. But whatever the cutoff, real or imagined, the fact is, no one knows how much someone or some company paid for something they sent, so now unless whatever comes in is obviously extremely expensive, like a fishing boat, or a \$100 gift certificate to a restaurant or something like that, we keep it.”*

— Features reporter, metro newspaper

*“It’s all a matter of personal discretion. And it’s pretty easy to rationalize, if you want to keep something, that it is not an ethics violation, either because it came from some big anonymous company with no idea who will ultimately get custody of it, and therefore couldn’t possibly intend to extract a favor in the future, or because the person who is sending this \$40 bouquet is a source who knows very well that you can’t be bought, and is merely doing the courteous thing while you’re recovering from abdominal surgery or whatever.”*

— Reporter, midsize newspaper

## **Uneven enforcement**

So while most papers have stated policies against accepting gifts or favors, the policies, according to participants in this survey, are vague enough to allow for a large measure of individual interpretation or are inconsistently enforced by management. It is the latter that seemed to spawn the greatest level of concern — and ire — among the staff.

*“It’s a little confusing here. On the one hand we are told not to keep gifts and freebies, on the other hand the editor has no problem with a senior reporter and photographer accepting expensive jackets from a charity group they went overseas with.”*

— Reporter, midsize newspaper

That sort of annoyance over management sending mixed messages was echoed by scores of respondents:

*“It sort of depends on who you are whether you get to keep something.”*

— Copy editor, 42, midsize newspaper

*“The editor doesn’t want to have to give up his free seats at various events, so in order not to be completely hypocritical, he tends to be very nonspecific about what the rules are. He only swoops in and issues a lecture when the gift is so blatant that it’s almost impossible to ignore.”*

— Reporter, 36, midsize newspaper

*“Free tickets to events are unacceptable, unless, we discovered last week, it’s a columnist who’s getting the ticket, or an editorial writer.”*

— City hall reporter, metro newspaper

Inconsistency is anathema to most people. This maxim holds especially true with newspaper people.

## Auction pros and cons

Some newsrooms have attempted to reduce that dissonance by establishing direct funnels into which the assorted goods are sent.

*“Our newsroom has a pretty strict ethics code that is enforced. All products sent by companies are sold at an auction [in the newsroom] and proceeds are given to a charity.”*

— Features editor, 61, midsize newspaper

Indeed, three of the newspapers in this study have auction-freebies policies, with the proceeds turned over to area organizations and agencies.

But as staffers at all three newspapers pointed out, such a policy is far from perfect. First, an annual or quarterly or even monthly auction does not allow for the disposal of perishables like flowers, pizzas and candied apples (all given as examples). Those are consumed or enjoyed on the spot rather than being placed aside to rot before the next auction.

More important, the people/companies/institutions who sent all those items are rarely informed of the newspaper’s method of disposing of freebies, so they continue to send items year after year, assuming they are having the intended positive impact. And in the end, staffers reap the benefit of the largesse by having the opportunity to buy top-brand wines, CDs, food products and books at bargain-basement auction prices.

*“I don’t feel any more positively disposed to wine distributor X because he sent in a great bottle of wine that I managed to purchase for \$4. But the whole process makes me feel a little smarmy, like I’m pushing the edges into a swampy area that smells pretty bad and leaves me a little oily. I’m taking advantage of a system that is inherently and obviously not right. What we ought to be doing is shipping these things off every day to whatever agencies can use them and immediately writing a note to the purveyors, telling them exactly what we’ve done. I’m pretty sure that if we or any other newspaper did this, the steady flow of graft would dry up immediately.”*

— Reporter, midsize newspaper

*“We used to have a lot of resentment toward the reporters and editors who were constantly getting boxes of graft, and would talk in angry, moralistic tones about it. Now we have none, of course, because we’re all getting to share.”*

— Another reporter, same newspaper

The auction approach, imperfect and often ill thought-out, at least provides a fairly clear-cut framework within which all know they must operate.

## **Left to their own devices**

At all but one of the remaining papers in this survey, the policies seem to be vaguely enough stated and loosely enough enforced that employees feel they are left to essentially make their own choices. In most cases, it should be pointed out, their choices may be quite good. However, top leaders' apparent unwillingness to wrestle a sometimes-volatile issue into codified rules, and managers' apparent reluctance to police often-amorphous policy, have led to confusion, bitterness and in some cases unwise choices.

For some, the imprudent choices may have been nothing more than the predictable misjudgments of youth:

*“I learned last week that my city hall reporter has been having lunch with the mayor — presumably on (the mayor’s) expense account, every Thursday for weeks. She saw no problem with this practice, insisting that this was the one time every week she could get an uninterrupted hour of the mayor’s time.*

*“The mayor said he always took lunch in and on Thursdays he would simply have two sandwiches sent in instead of one. She said that since she handled herself with total professionalism at all times, and that the discussions were always about city business, neither the mayor nor anyone else could draw the conclusion that she was getting too cozy with a city official.*

*“While on one hand I applaud her determination in arranging a weekly meeting with the mayor, on the other, the appearance issue is always a big one.*

*“There’s no telling what the mayor — or whoever sees his expense accounts — might conclude from these weekly presumably taxpayer-funded tête-à-têtes (even if only for a \$3 sandwich). And, honestly, there is no way that someone so new to the profession and so new to rubbing up close to power, even in a small town, won’t be flattered or biased in some subtle or not subtle ways by this kind of contact.”*

— Editor, small newspaper

*“I worry about younger reporters. A lot of them seem to be coming in with little or no foundation in or understanding of ethics. ‘Why can’t I accept free dance lessons since I’m doing a story that mentions the studio?’ This is a question I actually had to answer for one of my reporters. It’s horrifying.”*

— Features editor, metro newspaper

## **Features, sports pinpointed**

Features, sports and entertainment are the greatest trouble areas when it comes to questionable behavior relating to goods and favors, according to dozens of respondents in this survey. It must be noted that participants were asked no question regarding tendency toward ethical impropriety as it relates to one department over another, so there is no way to quantify these comments.

But more than 100 respondents offered the observation that in general their newsrooms have become more strict about freebies, but sports, features and entertainment operate with what appears to them to be an entirely different set of standards.

*“Graft is way down in news areas, but still high in others, like sports.”*

— Copy editor, 29, midsize newspaper

*“I don’t believe we have a pronounced ethical problem. However, I believe we are lax in informing people of particulars of the code ... and too much latitude is given sportswriters in accepting gifts from sources.”*

— Copy desk manager, 44, small newspaper

*“The gifts that arrive from sources — primarily in the features department — have become an acceptable feature of the newsroom, as long as you share the food, candy and other items.”*

— Business reporter, 37, metro paper

The significant amount of finger-pointing in the direction of features, entertainment and sports may or may not indicate a more serious problem in those departments. Common sense would suggest that because those departments are the ones to which the bulk of the gifts and favors are directed, they are the ones where the greatest laxity might exist. However, it is anecdotal comments about perceived realities, not quantifiable realities that were gleaned from their comments.

All that can be said is that the level of outrage was high, and respondents from nearly every newspaper laid forth what they regarded as gift-accepting improprieties in their newsrooms.

### **An extreme example**

Even in the context of many declared improprieties, there was one newsroom that stood out from all the rest. More than half the respondents at this Midwest metro made reference to what they termed the prevailing “reprehensible,” “unspeakably unethical” or “sickening” culture of freebie acceptance.

Some of their comments:

*“The biggest problem at this newspaper — and it is a big one — is reporters and editors accepting freebies and favors from the people they cover. In my 10 years here this has gone on openly with certain individuals, and of course it compromises them and makes their journalism worthless.”*

— Projects reporter

*“In my newsroom graft has been an integral part of our daily operation. Food writers, music writers and others receive reams of stuff and covet it all.”*  
— Writer for the magazine

*“Too many reporters accept free lunches, get free gifts and attend social and sporting events as guests of sources. It is a classic double standard. Those same reporters would fry a politician for sitting in a corporate box, but brag about their own great deal at an event, courtesy of a source.”*  
— Metro reporter

*“I am aware of numerous instances of what I consider gross unethical conduct, particularly with the sports department, primarily in the acceptance of gifts. Traditionally this type of conduct has been winked at.”*  
— Metro reporter

*“Free food and wine! Free sports tickets! Too much ambiguity about the rules, and what exactly is a source. I think reporters dip into the perks too often. ... The food writer routinely accepts discounted or free food. The travel writer funnels writing projects to his wife. The entertainment editor happily accepts free CDs. And at Christmastime this year the sports staff received blankets and binoculars from a local sports franchise. These situations exist with the full knowledge of senior editors.”*  
— Metro reporter

That newspaper — if those comments are accurate — is operating in the extreme, compared with other papers in the study.

### **The most upright**

A few hundred miles away, another Midwest metro is operating at the other extreme.

*“The old-fashioned take artists who used to populate newsrooms are fading away. The younger ones are more puritanical.”*  
— Cityside reporter

*“No gifts of virtually any kind are accepted. It has come a long way from the time when gifts were continually coming in. The paper pays its own way at all times. It doesn’t take freebies. Ever. ... If there are a few rules here about which there is no gray around the edges, the no-taking-of-any-sort rule is one of them. We’re all very clear about that.”*  
— Metro reporter

This newspaper's position on this particular topic is so clear and so unyielding that the entire staff (or the roughly 40 percent who responded to this survey) expressed not only an absolute understanding of the expectations, but a clear realization of the consequences for not meeting them.

And while the enactment and enforcement of this policy has left a lot former recipients empty-handed, no bitterness was communicated by the respondents to this survey. Indeed, staff comments indicate this is a policy employees support and about which they are quite proud.

Whether this zero-tolerance stand substantially improves coverage, impacts other ethical considerations or leads to a higher level of public respect might be arguable. But the fact that there is a clearly stated unambiguous, unwavering stand from the top on down seems to have created a cultural contempt for the very notion of freebies of any sort.



# Inconsistency, Laxity and Concern

CHAPTER FIVE



WHEN abuses of journalistic ethics occur, the most severe forms of justice, however they might be defined, are not always meted out swiftly in newsrooms.

Oddly, the industry that has routinely eaten others' young is often quite blind to its own infractions and slow or reluctant to take harsh action.

*"There are very few offenses for which people can get fired here. My colleagues can't remember the last time someone was actually fired. What newspapers say they do and what actually happens in newsrooms are two different things."*

— Metro reporter, 30, metro newspaper

*"It is impossible to say which infractions are punishable by reprimand or firing because discipline has been meted out unevenly and erratically."*

— Features reporter, 41, metro newspaper

*"I think it's pretty hard to get fired from this newspaper — and, from what I hear, from any newspaper — regardless of what you do. For example, the government reporter last year yelled at a state senator on the floor of the senate. He was demoted, then quit because of the demotion. I think his punishment should have been more severe."*

— Copy editor, small newspaper

It would be ideal if ethical behavior were a shiny monolith that all newspeople embraced in unflinching unison, but the fact is that some fall short.

The way many respondents in this survey see it, too few of those who are guilty of grievous breaches endure consequences.

There is by no means a lynch-mob mentality simmering beneath the surface in newsrooms. But there is a clearly articulated feeling that stronger sanctions should be applied in many cases.

*"We have people working here who have no business being in this line of work. Three people, in particular, turn in stories filled with inaccuracies, accept and in one case expect handouts from their sources, and they receive the same kinds of performance reviews and the same raises every year as the rest of us do. Not one has ever been told, 'the next time you turn in a story in which the key source's name is spelled three different ways, you're getting a warning, and the next time after that, you're out of here.'"*

— Metro reporter, 36, midsize newspaper

*"There are few things I would regard as fire-on-the-spot offenses. But making up a source is one of them, being convicted of a significant crime (DUI) is another, and insulting a public official in public is another. We've had all three in the last five years, and the perpetrators all still work here."*

— Features editor, metro newspaper

Unpunished, unacceptable behavior drew a notably high level of fire at the four Guild newspapers in this study. Upper-level people, predictably, had a great deal to say. So did the rank and file. Among their comments:

*“In cases of serious breaches of ethics, the great challengers from the Guild makes management wishy-washy and unlikely to serve up serious reprimand.”*

— Sports editor, metro newspaper

*“If ethical practices in journalism are to be strengthened and respected, management must get tougher in its response to serious or repeated breaches and organizations that exist to advocate for workers must do a better job of picking their battles. Management should not accept the indefensible and unions should not defend it.”*

— Editorial chief, metro newspaper

*“I’m tired of management blaming Guild reaction as a reason not to post an ethics code. I’m tired of the Guild not dealing with ethics.”*

— Features reporter, metro newspaper

*“It’s not easy to fire a reporter at a Guild paper, and it should not be. But does that mean that incompetents should be left alone to blithely do their damage year after year with no one ever pulling them aside and doing what they need to do to get them to clean up their acts? No.”*

— Reporter, 42, metro newspaper

Still, it would be inaccurate to portray this sense of need for stronger sanctions as unanimous. There are those in newsrooms who believe dictating harsher penalties would be demeaning, unfair and counterproductive.

*“As with any situation in life, circumstances need to be considered. Is this the first-time offense for a 25-year veteran? What led him or her to breach the policy? Was an effort made to correct the mistake or was there a cover-up? Sure there are some fire-on-the-spot situations, but all the facts should be collected before decisions are made.”*

— Business editor, metro newspaper

Stricter sanctions may or may not be necessary, in the minds of study participants. But if there were more precise guidelines there would be less room for personal interpretation and personal failing, the majority believe.

### **Guidelines needed**

Some 68 percent of those surveyed made spontaneous reference to a desire for more clarity, more specificity, a clear-cut list of guidelines or a code.

The realities of today’s world and today’s newsrooms mandate such a

thing, they said.

Conventional wisdom has always put forth that the good ones among newspaper people have an internal compass that consistently points them in the proper direction. Furthermore, it is assumed there is a shared set of values that keeps everyone operating at a fairly high level.

Many participants, however, expressed concern that internal compasses may not be unfailingly true and that the long-held assumptions about shared values may be incorrect or not as universally embraced as might be ideal. They are only speculating, of course, as there is no clear evidence quantifying the degree of adherence to presumed values. But many survey participants have seen enough to be worried.

The level of confusion, contradiction and laxity can be reduced only by newsrooms getting serious about discussing and detailing a code of ethics and standards.

Many participants offered that they want such a code in black and white, on paper.

*“I hate rules and forms and policies and bureaucracy as much as the next guy. But I think having [standards and ethics] clarified, having them on paper is probably the only way we can get to the point that we’re all operating under more or less the same set of principles.”*

— Assistant city editor, 43, midsize paper

*“My biggest worry is that if newspapers don’t put together their own ethics policies, someone else is going to do it for us.”*

— Projects editor, midsize paper

## **Put it in writing**

Of the 20 participating newspapers, three have written codes. The others do not — in some cases because they have planned to develop one but never managed to finish the task and in others because they were advised by their lawyers that written policies may increase their liability.

Although many participants from the newspapers with written codes said their codes are at times unevenly and unfairly enforced, they nevertheless had fewer complaints about arbitrary enforcement than those at newspapers where codes are not written. And they had a more accurate sense of the behaviors and actions that might lead to reprimand or firing.

*“Our newspaper has very defined rules and regulations and the fact that they are codified gives them teeth.”*

— Sports editor, metro newspaper

The desire many expressed for a written code may be nothing more than an example of people wanting what they do not have. Or it may be a sincere need, born of seeing for too long the improprieties that can rise to the surface when the rules have been inadequately detailed or communicated.

*“The rules are a mystery, hypocritically applied ... we have no real guide, just consequences for some but certainly not all who run into the invisible walls.”*

— Features reporter, 32, midsize paper

*“Rules are unwritten here so they can be used arbitrarily.”*

— Copy editor, 43, midsize newspaper

*Of the 20 participating newspapers  
only 3 have written codes.*

*“We do have some strict policies on drugs/alcohol, but, I believe, only because the tolerance levels were tested to the limits by some employees, one of whom is still here. Other policies are either so vague that no one knows about them, or they don’t exist at all. There are some unwritten ‘expectations,’ but no formal written policy we can all refer to.*

*It’s something a paper this size desperately needs to adopt.”*

— Sports reporter, 47, metro newspaper

*“Everyone has his own set of ethics here. Nothing is formalized. Sometimes a policy pops up as if it has been around a long time, even though no one has ever heard of it.”*

— Editorial page editor, metro paper

*“Our rules are not clearly defined. Newspapers are far more concerned about ethics now than in the not-too-distant past. Our publisher, however, is rejecting instituting a full written ethics code, for reasons unclear to most, and this can be a problem when it comes to the many gray areas.”*

— Copy editor, 61, midsize newspaper

*“We have great ethics and great soul, but we need to get guidelines in writing.*

*Almost always we make the right call. We care. We debate professionally.*

*We value fairness as well as accuracy. Getting that stuff in writing will make the process easier and more consistent.”*

— Metro reporter, 33, small newspaper

## Some are opposed

The cry for more specific, more tangible written guidelines, while potent, was by no means unanimous, and those on the other side made some compelling arguments for keeping things as they are.

*“I think we deal with 1,000 ethical questions a day. What we do is very subjective. Our newspaper gives us a lot of latitude to make decisions and choices, and it tries to give us the training to make those decisions well. That, in my opinion, is far more important than a list of dos and don’ts.”*

— Business reporter, 28, midsize newspaper

*“Reporters are expected to know a few cardinal rules about plagiarism, fabrication and being involved with sources. But I don’t believe an ethics policy can be spelled out in minute detail in black and white.”*

— Metro reporter, 24, midsize newspaper

*“Ethics by their nature are pliable. They are ‘the right thing to do’ not ‘the rule.’”*

— Features editor, 48, midsize paper

*“Rules are well-intentioned but most often out of touch with reality. I constantly examine my motives and my actions. My integrity is everything. If people don’t trust me or believe me I am finished as a writer. However, existing in the real world and following guidelines set by self-proclaimed moralists out of touch with the real world are two different things. What sounds good in theory is absurd in reality. And that’s where I’m afraid written codes — and surveys like this one — do more harm than good.”*

— Sports editor, midsize paper

*“Real-life professional decisions are much more complex than any code can govern.”*

— Metro reporter, 39, midsize paper

*“Ethics codes are a ploy to convince readers we are ‘professional,’ as well as a tool to fire employees.”*

— Features editor, midsize newspaper

In newsrooms, as in life, some people are constitutionally more comfortable when things are clear, precise and quite hard and fast; others prefer having things very loose, in order to accommodate situational variations. It is a contrast of style and preference that exists in all organizations.

But newspaper people, as a group, have a bias for the written word. It is how they were trained. Most of them seem to take comfort in records, tangible items and scraps of paper that can be referred to again and again.

And that comes through in this survey. Fully 55 percent of the respondents who made spontaneous reference to the clarity of their ethics code, bemoaned the fact that it was not clearly stated on paper.



# Many People, Many Voices, Many Views

## CHAPTER SIX



ALTHOUGH the majority of participants in this study say they want more clarity, stronger guidelines, swifter sanctions and less fuzziness, the minority is rarely silent, and even the majority does not speak with only one voice in all matters.

Most people in this study said strong ethics and high standards are critical to performing good journalism, but there are marked differences among them regarding the degree of peril they believe the industry faces, the extent to which they believe their colleagues are doing dishonorable things, the definitions of dishonorable and the most effective ways of ensuring that good journalism gets done.

Thus, any newsroom's efforts to come up with straightforward, hard-and-fast rules and sanctions might not be as simple to accomplish or as universally embraced as some would assume.

As the participants in this study vividly showed, for every point there is a counterpoint:

*"I'm one of the few people who finds most ethics policies reprehensible. What could be considered ethical for some people might be considered unethical by many. An ethics policy, if it is allowed to exist at all, must have enough flexibility to change as society does."*

— Sports columnist, 45, metro newspaper

versus

*"Credibility is a newspaper's most important asset, so it's important that ethical standards be spelled out clearly. Such guidelines can't cover every situation that arises, but they should be put in place and rigidly enforced as a reminder to all in the newsroom that ethical standards are a priority."*

— Copy editor, 43, metro newspaper



*"I like the fact that my newspaper has a written ethics policy. If reporters are told upfront what is expected and what is prohibited, everyone's job is easier."*

— Metro reporter, 32, midsize newspaper

versus

*"Regular staff discussions are more important than a written policy. Most at this paper could not tell you what's in the policy we do have, and its rules are routinely violated with management's assent."*

— Reporter, metro newspaper

*“I think the younger reporters, fresh out of journalism school, filled with the idealism and commitment to ethical practices we were taught to believe in, are much more careful about ethical practices than the older ones, who began working at a time when ethics weren’t stressed, and also have become jaded over the years.”*

— Business reporter, 28, small newspaper

versus

*“I believe younger journalists are too busy trying to get the big story sometimes to care about how they get it. The field is so competitive that many journalists forget the real reason they went into this line of work, or the importance of maintaining ethics and truthfulness. And editors are too busy to find time to talk to their reporters, find out what they’re up to and if it passes the sniff test.”*

— Metro reporter, 26, small newspaper

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*“There are strong ethics in theory (at my paper), but when reporters find they are not accountable for them, they bend the rules.”*

— Reporter, 23, small newspaper

versus

*“You cannot legislate or force ethical behavior, no matter how punitive you swear to be or, in fact, are. There have always been and will always be people who don’t care about ethics, regardless of how much capital punishment is meted out. Just as there will always be sanctimonious moralists.”*

— Metro reporter, 58, metro newspaper

◆◆◆

*“The ethics standards that seem to be strongest come from individual reporters’ and editors’ personal philosophy, not from a policy established by an organization they work for.”*

— Features reporter, 40, metro newspaper

versus

*“Ethical behavior is something that must be learned at a newspaper because behavior that would be accepted and even encouraged in other businesses is not acceptable in journalism.”*

— Editor-in-chief, metro newspaper

*“This paper has one policy it applies to most of the people who work here, and one it applies to the people who don’t. If I were on the outside looking in, I would definitely want the internal one applied to me or my family in the case of a traffic accident, a death, crime, drugs or other criminal behavior.”*

— Sports reporter, 39, midsize newspaper

versus

*“This paper has been most unethical when it has overreacted to the appearance of impropriety. For example, in one case, the names of juveniles in a criminal case were published because the parent of one of the kids works at the newspaper. So what about the injustice to the parents of all the rest of the children in this case, not to mention the children themselves? A far more serious breach involved a series damaging the personal and public reputation of a city official, alleging crimes that were never charged, much less proven, despite several investigations.”*

— Metro reporter, midsize newspaper

◆◆◆

*“My sense is that ethics in my newsroom, and in most newsrooms, are fluid. And they shouldn’t be.”*

— Features reporter, 48, metro newspaper

versus

*“Like life ethics, newspaper ethics is all situational. There is no hard and fast answer and there can be none.”*

— Metro reporter, 58, metro newspaper

◆◆◆

*“I would expect that at most major metro newspapers the ethics are strongly enforced. There is too much to lose otherwise. However, smaller and more closely held papers are less likely to train for or enforce standards.”*

— Projects editor, 40, metro newspaper

versus

*“The behavior here is a lot more closely monitored — by management and by the community — than when I was a reporter at a metro. In a community this size, everyone knows someone who knows someone, and no one survives as a newsperson here if they make up quotes, fabricate sources (which our columnists at the metro paper*

*did all the time) or treat their news sources rudely or unethically. At my old (metro) paper, the staff was so big and the community so huge that reporters could do almost anything and not be discovered.”*

— Metro editor, midsize paper



*“I believe there is in our newsroom a general understanding of journalism ethics or assumed morality which parallels the mores of the community. We strive to be accurate, unbiased and honest in our reporting, avoiding conflicts of interest.”*

— Reporter, midsize paper

versus

*“We assume colleagues share values and ethical standards, and that they’re the same values and standards that we learned in journalism school. But they don’t, and they aren’t. Why are we so determined to convince ourselves they do? The world has changed, society is changing, and no profession is immune to that. We can’t continue to be so arrogant in assuming that the mere decision to enter the great world of newspapering automatically elevates our values, our thinking and our ways of doing things.”*

— Senior editor, 48, midsize newspaper



*“Many reporters do not have an arm’s length relationship with sources, which is high risk, in my opinion.”*

— Metro editor, 52, metro newspaper

versus

*“The recent trend toward less adversarial, more human relationships with sources will promote more ethical behavior because we will be able to think of our sources as human beings rather than faceless items, and temper our decisions accordingly.”*

— Reporter, 29, midsize newspaper

Any newsroom attempting to change or modify existing practices must be prepared to hear from and give weight to the opposition to every point. For it is not just policies one is examining and challenging, it is practices.

And the realities of day-to-day work do not always mesh easily with high-minded principle.

“Officially, I can’t allow a slip, ever,” wrote a metro editor, 32, at a small

newspaper. “Unofficially, there’s a lot I don’t know. When I hear of a slip, I tell them not to let it happen again.”

“You can indoctrinate a reporter with all the rules you want. But we’re the ones out there getting the story,” wrote a 40-year-old reporter at a metro newspaper. “And if the strictest interpretation of those rules stands in the way of getting the story, what do you think we’ll do?”

# Once-Distant Drums Grow Louder Still

CHAPTER SEVEN



**W**HATEVER concerns newsroom folks might harbor about their own misbehavior is exceeded by their concerns about what goes on in and around the publisher's office.

In fact, the way many of them see it, the greatest threats to newspaper credibility, integrity and longevity are vested in the actions of those several layers above them.

*“Ethics at the top makes what happens at the reporter level pale by comparison. And unfortunately, business influence over the press looks likely to further increase.”*

— Business editor, 46, metro newspaper

*“The greatest danger to journalistic ethics comes not from the newsroom but from the corporate board room. Like all corporations, newspaper chains must protect the bottom line. Publishers and top management must meet their MBO objectives. Bean counters must safeguard revenue streams. In such a culture advertisers are likely to be treated as sacred cows. Pressure is likely to be exerted, subtly or overtly, against stories that portray advertisers in a negative light.”*

— Online writer, 45, metro newspaper

*“I worry that as pressures mount on profit demands publishers are pressed to look at news ethics as expendable, if not in a grand way than in much more slight yet insidious ways. They may, for instance, let it affect their hiring decisions on top editors, which in turn affects other hiring decisions in the newsroom.”*

— Editor, 40, midsize paper

The concerns expressed by the respondents in this study included:

- Encroaching business-side influence
- Publisher behavior that can put newsroom sanctity in peril
- Hyper-controlling corporate headquarters hundreds of miles away
- Knee-jerk attachment to new technologies and the latest journalism trends.

Although some of these newsroom concerns are as old as time, many may take on new urgency in this era of increased competition and shifts in mores. And while marketplace realities may require some modifications in the way things have always been done, many in this study are concerned that the industry groupthink and behavior are careening out of control.

*“My biggest concern is the willingness of newspapers to kowtow to corporate interests and institutions. That is a bigger threat to the professionalism of newspapers than the occasional dishonest reporter or editor.”*

— Metro reporter, 30, midsize paper

*“The significant question in journalism today has little to do with newsroom standards. It is management ethics you need to address. Ownership and management run newsrooms today to an extent that was unimaginable even five years ago.”*

— Editorial writer, 61, small paper

And the way many of the participants see it, the people who have increasing control or influence over newsrooms have flawed principles and/or little regard for what the newsroom holds dear.

*“People who are lower in the newspaper structure take the standards and ethics issue more seriously than top management. The publisher and sometimes other vice presidents are more focused on short-term gain.”*

— Senior editor, 50, metro paper

*“In my newsroom, it’s hard to maintain any sense of ethics when the publisher’s entire family works here, the former recruiter was (and still is) sleeping with the vice president.”*

— Metro reporter, metro newspaper

## Advertorials

The growth of advertorials is something many of the study participants decried. Among comments:

“I hate the romancing of advertisers with soft news stories and promos. Our special sections are usually advertorials. I understand the economic need but feel sad about the lack of straight-ahead journalism.”

— Reporter, 73, small newspaper

“There remain only a few bricks in the thick wall that once separated the newsroom from advertising. We do what’s best for profits, not what’s best for journalism, what is ethical or what is best for the readers.”

— Features reporter, 46, small paper

“The line between editorial copy and advertorial copy has grown so subtle that we can barely distinguish the difference any more, and I’m certain readers have no clue. If we have all this space to fritter away, I think we should probably ask readers what they’d like to see us write about, rather than letting advertisers dictate what we will write about.”

— Metro reporter, 38, midsize paper

## Publishers

Publisher behavior took a hit in this study. Among comments:

“The publisher is on every board in town, and there is too much concern paid about whether he will get sniped at over a story we’ve done while he’s at a board meeting or cocktail party.”

— Features reporter, 48, metro newspaper

“Attempting to improve here would be difficult since the publisher has no compunction about entangling alliances. He led an effort to spend public money to refurbish the hall used almost exclusively by the orchestra and then trumpeted his triumph in an eight-page full color section.”

— Manager, metro newspaper

“Historically, the worst ethical conflicts involved the publisher. Even the worst reporters know right from wrong, and their actions reflect that 95 percent of the time.”

— Reporter, midsize newspaper

And when employees doubt the scruples and motivations of the decision-makers, every new line crossed portends even worse things to come.

*“The general code hasn’t changed much in 20 years. The most profound shift is corporatization. We blur the editorial/advertising line much more than we used to with the result that many issues never arise because we have been corrupted before we even knew we needed to address them. It’s impossible to imagine where or when this might end.”*

— Features editor, metro paper

Many newsroom employees, operating without much information or discussion and presented with new practices and policies only after the fact, worry their newspaper’s top management is discarding principles to such a degree that newsrooms can’t hope to present a credible, unbiased, reliable product.

Ethics self-examination, many study participants believe, should and must start at the top.

It could be argued that newsroom employees should tend to their own problems and not attempt to deflect attention into another’s camp.

This would be a reasonable argument. It also would be a shortsighted one.

Although it is true that newsrooms may have some cleaning up to do, it is equally true that when employees perceive impropriety at the top, they are likely to eventually engage in their own forms of impropriety. It is usually a subtle movement, but an inevitable one.

This is not to suggest that all of the recent moves toward partnering, corporatization, advertorials and community involvement are damnable and must immediately be reversed. It is also not to say that newsrooms should not aim for a consistent ethical high ground unless and until those above them are operating in a fashion that the newsroom deems proper.

But it must be recognized that no one in authority in the organization can expect to glide quietly into behaviors that were heretofore considered inappropriate without anyone noticing. And when such behaviors breach or threaten what are regarded as fundamental precepts, a cornerstone of the organizational belief system disappears, leaving its inhabitants to list crazily, vulnerable to any passing breeze.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

CHAPTER EIGHT



EW newspaper people want to believe that some among them are not approaching their work with the utmost professionalism, yet most in this survey acknowledge that some fault lines have formed beneath the surface in their newsrooms.

The unfortunate fissures seem to be the result of too many assumptions and too little self-examination, as well as too little or too narrowly dispersed communication and reiteration of standards and expectations.

It would be easy to assume that the newsrooms in this study are the exception, that most newsrooms — or specific newsrooms — are not contending with nearly the same level of confusion, inappropriate behavior or values displacement. That might be a valid assumption.

However, the top editors in this study imagined they were attuned to the goings-on, the general thinking and the overall ethical climate in their own newsrooms. They were not.

It now becomes not a matter of how it happened or where the fault lies, but rather of what actions will be taken to correct things before they are out of hand.

No one can or should presume to tell any given newsroom how to handle its own business. It would, however, be prudent for top management at any newspaper to consider the concerns and recommendations of the hundreds of journalists in this study.

■ First and foremost is the issue of values clarification. Confusion in any group, no matter how well-educated, well-trained or highly principled, can lead to a breakdown in behavior. Journalism is a profession in which daily work and decision-making are drenched in shades of gray, so newspaper people are by career definition forced to make judgment calls more often than people in many other lines of work. Only when the ideal toward which everyone should be moving is clearly and repeatedly articulated and rewarded can employees make wise, uncompromised gray-area choices. So top leadership must construct solid communication channels for detailing values and expectations that reach every employee in an undiluted way.

Whether this code should or must be written as opposed to spoken is a matter of organizational preference. The vast majority in this study who stated a preference supported written policies because of the specificity they offer and the fact that they can be pulled out and referred to in moments of confusion. Lawyers and publishers who have opposed written policies would do well to consider journalists' highly conditioned need for tangible proof of all things, as well as the preference most people making hourly judgment calls have for rock-solid rules.

■ If the standards are clearly stated, infractions must be dealt with swiftly and convincingly. This is not to say that the harsh boot heel of authority should be capriciously used to intimidate employees. But consequences fairly and evenly

applied reassure those who abide by the rules that they are not engaging in a fool's errand. They also act as a course correction when group behavior is in jeopardy of disintegrating. Human beings live by notions of equity. And when employees see that a person who is not abiding by the rules or norms suffers no consequences, they will find ways to level things out. It is never in the organization's best interest when that happens. Top management should and must move quickly to right wrongs, lest the staff find ways to do that on their own.

■ A great deal of concern was leveled toward the younger, less experienced in the newsroom ranks. Reduced budgets, increased responsibilities for supervisors and a host of other factors have resulted in less guidance and oversight of young journalists at most newspapers. The learn-as-you-go approach to which newsrooms subscribe is always risky in the values-development arena, but is especially so when the rules are unclear, unwritten and/or unevenly applied. And assuming that young people learned everything they needed to know about ethical behavior in journalism school is a mistake, as is assuming that people of strong character usually will make the right choices.

The Harvard Business School found from studying its graduate students that neither "good early childhood habituation in the moral realm" nor "a capacity for empathy," nor "good personal character" was sufficient for guiding their students toward good ethical choices, according to Thomas Piper, Mary Gentile and Sharon Daloz Parks, who wrote a 1993 book called "*Can Ethics Be Taught?*" Although the book focuses on debunking the conventional wisdom that ethical behavior cannot be taught after about age 10 or 12 and zeros in on methods Harvard uses to instill business ethics in its 20- and early 30something graduate students, it offers some meaningful insights for any company dealing with young professionals.

One of the most resonating, if chilling, is that even their most impressive graduate students, all of whom had at least four years of college behind them, and many of whom had spent a few years in the corporate world, do not have a firmly grounded grasp or sense of ethical business behavior. The chief reason, the authors postulated, is that they have never really put such considerations to daily test. Most within that age group have not been forced to "critically reflect upon some of the important issues before them and their societies; they have a limited consciousness of systemic harm and injustice and only a limited sense of what is at stake." In short, they are extremely vulnerable to accepting almost any practice, whim or goal they see pursued by their co-workers.

Leaving young newsroom employees to fend for themselves and glean what they can from however they interpret others' behaviors is potentially calamitous.

Top management must recognize that ethical behavior is not an inherent

part of the package that arrives at the door when a promising young journalist of fine character is hired, nor is it bestowed by good instruction in journalism schools, nor is it something that develops unerringly even in a newsroom with a lot of rules.

Young professionals need a great deal of guidance to navigate the shoals of their daily work if they are to develop a solid grasp of ethical considerations. Systems should be set up to ensure that happens. That might mean regular contact with top editors. That might mean frequent training sessions to explore some of the journalistic conundrums their co-workers have faced. That might mean attaching them to a mentor, whose key responsibility it is to instill a strong sense of that newsroom's values. It probably should include all three methods.

■ Competition, marketplace shifts and new technologies present an ever-changing array of opportunities and challenges. Most newspapers are struggling to react, many of them without much open discussion exploring how today's development or tomorrow's newsroom reaction might ultimately shake down.

It is unfortunate that newspapers seem to find themselves in the position of reacting rather than being pro-active. But that has been the recent reality in most newsrooms. And it would be unwise for an industry to ignore new developments simply because it was not quite prepared for them.

Still, the participants in this study raise some intriguing concerns. Are newspapers risking their creed by allowing themselves to be hauled into competing with the tabloids? Are there unforeseen risks inherent in putting the newspaper product on the Internet, or relying heavily on the Internet for information gathering? Are there unrecognized long-term perils attached to some of the emerging technologies? The questions are philosophical in some cases. But they hark to an important and fundamental question: In their zeal to keep up, are newspapers — and newsrooms in particular — giving sufficient attention to the potential downsides, as well as the upsides, of the steps they are taking? And are they doing a sufficient amount of exploration and trouble-shooting to ensure that they do not wind up institutionalizing practices that are counter-productive and counter-principled?

In the end, it is, of course, the top editor who must make the calls about what will be practiced and what will not, what will be institutionalized and what will not. But the speed-of-light developments and decision-making, some of which, if these respondents are correct, have deep and abiding ethical ramifications, probably require some regular large-group examination, to discuss the unanticipated fallout, to establish ground rules and to attempt to limit actions or behaviors that are un-newspaperlike.

■ Newspapers' top leaders — inside and outside the newsroom — have made some choices and taken some actions in recent years that seem to fly in the

face of newspaper tradition. And this has led to some unease in many newsrooms.

Part of this unease is no doubt born of the resistance most people feel toward anything that is new and different or that disrupts their vision of the way things would always be. Some of it is born of sincere concern that certain actions are, in fact, ethically questionable.

The newspaper industry has reached the spot where some new strategies must be considered. But top-ranking leaders at any newspaper must take care to move cautiously into previously forbidden territory, and to communicate the rationale, as well as clear parameters, lest employees grow to believe that ethics and principles have been abandoned. As Joanne B. Ciulla notes in her 1998 collection of essays entitled *Ethics, The Heart of Leadership*, shifting paradigms can be shifty paradigms when definitions are not articulated.

It begins and can end at the top.

“Without the continuous commitment, enforcement and modeling of leadership, standards of business ethics cannot and will not be achieved in any organization,” Loyola’s Al Gini wrote in an essay included in Ciulla’s book.

“The ethics of leadership, whether they be good or bad, positive or negative affect the ethos of the workplace and thereby help to form the ethical choices and decisions of workers in the workplace.”

### **Falling walls**

For decades, newsrooms have operated with their own sets of values, and whatever went on elsewhere in the organization was largely unknown or pointedly ignored by news staffers. Journalists were isolated and insulated, and this allowed them to become quite smug about their own behaviors versus those they knew or presumed existed elsewhere in the organization.

Suddenly, the walls of isolation are crumbling, and strangers from other floors, the very same people of questionable motivation, scruples and journalistic commitment, are far more intimately involved with the newsroom and the end product. It has been a forced marriage without prelude or discussion in most newsrooms. And newsroom employees are seeing up-close and very personally some ways of thinking and doing business that previously were not part of their universe. Much of what they see is not only foreign, but quite counter to their definitions of acceptable, honorable and principled.

It is entirely possible that newsrooms must become less intellectually rigid about what is acceptable behavior and what is not. It is an absolute certainty that those outside newsrooms must understand and respect the concerns of the newsroom.

As walls between departments fall or grow more translucent, leaders from all factions within the organization must work to establish, communicate and uphold common values that protect various traditions while allowing ethical

pursuit of unified goals. This does not happen on its own, and in the absence of clearly articulated ethical parameters employees will assume there are none.

These are difficult times for newspapers and newspaper people. There is much to be done to ensure longevity, as well as preserve a position of respect with the American public.

Still, there is more than a little hope for success.

Whatever level of displeasure and discouragement newsroom employees have with the current state of behavior and ethics is probably equaled by their optimism that the failings can be addressed and newspapers can take on a renewed push for ascendancy.

*“We can distinguish ourselves by being rigorously accurate and truthful.”*

— Metro editor, 28, metro newspaper

The advantage the newspaper industry has over many other professions is a work force that, daunted and imperfect as it may be, still believes for the most part in lofty principles:

*“Ethics are the glue that bonds newsrooms and newspapers. If one person is unethical, the entire staff and the entire paper suffers.”*

— Copy editor, 27, midsize paper

*“Ethics have never been better or better aired in my newsroom.*

*That said, there’s always room for us to do better.”*

— News desk chief, 48, metro newspaper

*“There is a growing belief in our community that journalists lack ethics, integrity and compassion. Much of this is derived from TV or tabloid news.*

*However, this means that we must be even better at monitoring ourselves.”*

— Copy editor, 31, metro newspaper

*“Every newspaper should expect nothing less than the highest ethical standards. Once credibility has been compromised, the quest for truth, our primary mission, is lost, and the institution is damaged, perhaps mortally. It is every person’s responsibility to attempt to prevent that.”*

— Metro reporter, 39, midsize paper

# The Methodology

APPENDIX



HIS researcher contacted 23 newspaper editors or publishers to enlist their participation in a multiple-choice written survey on newsroom standards and ethics.

Twenty of the newspaper executives agreed to participate.

Nearly 3,000 questionnaires were sent out during a five-week period extending from mid-December 1999 to late January 2000. At each participating newspaper, forms were distributed to all newsroom professionals involved with generating or editing stories. Photographers, artists and page designers were not included in this research (although managers of those departments were).

Participation at each newsroom was voluntary and anonymous, and measures were taken to ensure that the completed forms could not be read by anyone other than the researcher.

In the end, respondents numbered 904. Of these, 61 percent were from metro newspapers, 24 percent from midsize papers and 15 percent from small papers.

The respondents represented all facets of the word side of the newsroom operation: 44 percent were reporters, 33 percent editors/managers, 17 percent copy editors and 6 percent columnists, researchers or editorial writers.

They represented all news-side departments: 32 percent were on city/state/metro desks; 22 percent were features; 10 percent were sports; 10 percent were copy desk and 10 percent were business. The 16 percent who classified themselves as “other” included those from editorial or opinion pages and online operations, as well as photo or graphics managers, newsroom-wide administrators and those who split time between two departments

Ages ranged from 21 to 74; the average age was 42.6.

All the participants completed a two-page multiple-choice questionnaire, which dealt with newsroom standards (the understood level of acceptance relating to such things as stealing company property, sexual harassment, habitual absenteeism or general incompetence); newsroom journalism ethics (plagiarism, behavior toward sources, gifts and favors, modifying quotes and similar matters); consequences for breaching standards or ethics; and general newsroom practices relating to how and from whom they gain their knowledge about their own newsroom's operating practices.

Additionally, participants were asked to offer a short essay sharing insights or detailing their personal feelings about the state of ethics at newspapers today, with particular emphasis on their own newsrooms.

Some 71 percent of the respondents did, in fact, offer candid comments, insights and/or specific examples of behavior — both good and bad — about their own newsrooms. Thus, this report includes both quantitative and qualitative data.

### **The Study**

The participants were from 20 small, medium and metro newspapers in 11 states: Georgia, Ohio, Indiana, Texas, California, Virginia, North Carolina, New York, Washington, Illinois and Florida.

The participants were from independently owned newspapers as well as from chains: Gannett, Knight Ridder, Scripps Howard, Singleton, Newhouse, Media General and Tribune.

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### **Sharon Peters**



Sharon Peters, Ph.D., is an adjunct faculty member of the Media Management Center at Northwestern University. Peters is a 23-year veteran of the newspaper business, having held a variety of editing positions at the Jackson (MS) Clarion-Ledger, The Cincinnati Enquirer, and USA Today. She was managing editor of the Lexington (KY) Herald-Leader from 1991 to 1994. In October 2001 Peters was named editor and vice president of the Colorado Springs Gazette. Peters has researched and written several publications for the Media Management Center, including “Caught in the Middle: How to improve the lives and performance of newspaper middle managers” and the Center’s 1997 publication “In Their Prime: Motivating Senior Reporters.”







ETHICS AND STANDARDS IN NEWSROOMS TODAY

