

The Newsletter of the National Information Officers Association

NIOA NEWS

July – August 2010

www.nioa.org

Vol. 7, No. 4

Inside This Issue:

Boenig: Year at helm ends in FL

10 Suggestions for Conference

Processing 'The Unthinkable'

Final Clearwater prep under way

FIGHTING BACK

The Journalistic Ethics Code

By JONATHAN BERNSTEIN
Bernstein Crisis Management Inc.

In any profession, there are unethical people and unethical organizations. But while I may be too myopic to accurately analyze the ethical practices of my own profession, I can say that – in the 31 years since I was last a reporter – there appears to have been a steady deterioration of adherence to the principles taught in Journalism School, by mentors to young journalists, and by various journalism associations. I believe certain factors have exacerbated this decline in the past 5-10 years in particular, to include:

- Globalization of news demand via the Internet, driving the need to compete for news audiences 24/7.
- Fewer reporters (largely as a result of falling ad revenue), so they are



JONATHAN
BERNSTEIN

spread thin in terms of copy length and ability to carefully research stories.

- The growing popularity of sensationalism in the United States in particular, to the point where even the most staid media outlets look to entertain as much as they do to inform.

Some backlash has started to occur within the journalistic community, sparking the formation of organizations such as FactCheck.org, PolitiFact.org and the Center for Media and Democracy. The Ethical Journalism Initiative is attempting to “rekindle old values in media worldwide.” A remarkable throwback to the days of true investigative reporting has appeared at ProPublica.org. There is hope.

What I want to do here, however, is give anyone dealing with unethical journalists an invaluable tool that can be used, now, for mitigating damage -- the Society of Professional Journalists' (SPJ) Code of Ethics. It was designed to prevent damage from occurring but, even after the fact, I believe it can and should be used for damage control.

HOW TO USE THE SPJ'S CODE OF ETHICS

This is the Preamble to SPJ's Code of Ethics:

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. Members of the Society share a dedication to ethical behavior and adopt this code to declare the Society's principles and standards of practice.

Can you imagine any mainstream journalist daring to say that he or she does not support those principles, even if not a member of the SPJ? Other than

See JOURNALISM, page 6

I hope we never live to see the day when a thing is as bad as some of our newspapers make it.

– Will Rogers

Editor: a person employed by a newspaper, whose business it is to separate the wheat from the chaff, and to see that the chaff is printed. – Abby Aronowitz



Year at NIOA's helm coming to fast end

Sincere thanks to membership for making it a memorable experience

My, how fast these last 12 months have flown by! In a matter of days, we'll converge on Clearwater Beach, Fla., to meet for the NIOA's 20th annual Training Conference, where we'll see old friends and make new ones.

I'm shocked that this is my last column for the newsletter as your president. This year has been a very busy one for me, but it's been extremely rewarding. I've had the privilege to serve on the Board with some of the finest people in the public information world. We've been a cohesive group and that unification of effort made my job as president much easier. On the rare occasions when we didn't all agree, we worked together to create a solution that was best for the NIOA. I believe that work ethic can be found not only on the Board but in our membership as well and that makes the NIOA the exceptional group that it is.

When the 2010 conference ends, I'll hand the reins over to my good friend, Jack Goldhorn. Jack has done a fabulous job as vice president and I look forward to his year as president. He has always



Marlee Boenig

been dedicated to the betterment of the NIOA and I have no doubt that will continue.

In addition, I offer my sincere thanks to: Immediate Past President Rich Palmer, who astounds me with his ability to somehow stay informed of technological advances that benefit our field of work; Secretary Lou Thurston, who was able to keep

notes on all the business we attended to and still managed to share a story or two in between; our ever calm and unwavering Past President's Liaison Don Aaron, who has served on more than one occasion as my voice of reason; my very dear friend and sounding board, Executive Director Lisa McNeal, who keeps up with all of us and amazingly can answer any question given her about the association; NIOA News Editor Don Kelly, who continually produces a top-notch newsletter while maintaining a crazy travel/work schedule; and all of our past and present officers and Regional Directors for their many thankless hours of time spent working for the association. Despite all of us having hectic lives and never ending commitments, each person's dedication has impacted the NIOA and made it stronger.

It has been an honor and a privilege to serve as your president and I'm thankful that you allowed me the opportunity – for that I am grateful and appreciative beyond measure.

I hope to see each of you in Florida!

Top 10 suggestions for conference attendees



Don Kelly

Wow, another year has just flown by. Unbelievable how quickly they seem to pass. But yes, it's that time again, time for the NIOA Annual Training Conference.

For our new members and those of you attending your first conference, it's become somewhat of a tradition to publish my "Top 10 Suggestions for Conference Attendees" in the July-August issue and

help you get in the right frame of mind before you head to sunny Clearwater. So for what it's worth, here are my suggestions that, if followed, are guaranteed to enhance your conference and membership experience:

1. The NIOA meeting is a training conference, not a school. There is a difference.
2. Not every single session or speaker will apply specifically to my particular situation. But if I listen and keep an open mind, I can learn something from all of them.
3. If I am a brand new PIO, I will have realistic expectations. Attending the NIOA conference alone will not teach me everything I need to know about the job. But it will put me light-years ahead of where I was.
4. If I have at least three years experience as a PIO, I will accept that much of what I hear will be repetitive. But I will benefit from reinforcement of basic principles and varying perspectives.
5. I will not be able to meet every single attendee, but each day I will resolve to meet at least five new people and learn something about them. I will take the initiative to seek out those from my home region

that I do not already know.

6. I will recognize that much of the benefit of attending a conference comes from after-hours interaction and networking, so I will make an effort to socialize after the sessions end.

7. If I "play hooky" and skip two or more general sessions, I will willingly forfeit my right to criticize the conference as a whole, recognizing that it is put together as a complete package and it is unfair to judge it piecemeal.

8. I will recognize that I have paid for a four-day event, and I will make every effort to stay until the very last session ends on Wednesday.

9. If I am miserable, disappointed with the conference, or having problems with the hotel, I will seek out a Board member and tell them about it face-to-face. I will give them a reasonable opportunity to address the situation right there instead of bitching about it later.

10. I will write and submit one article for the newsletter, suggest one specific conference topic idea and speaker, recruit one new member, or make some other demonstrable contribution to the advancement of the NIOA before next year's training conference.



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NIOA News is the official newsletter of the National Information Officers Association. It is published six times annually. Contact us at: P.O. Box 10125, Knoxville TN 37939 or, by e-mail, at info@nioa.org.

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Drawing closer to Clearwater, reconnecting



Jack Goldhorn

Has it been a year already? It's coming up on the annual conference and we have a slate of speakers across all fields of public safety.

This will be my fourth time in Clearwater and I look forward to meeting both new members and renewing friendships with old members. The Board has worked hard in setting up a conference in these tough financial times to provide excellent training for all members.

Each year, we ask that members that do attend try to make each training session. I know the temptation of the beach and the warm weather is there but you will have ample free time to enjoy this great venue.

This has been my first year of serving on the

board and I want to express my thanks to the other Board members for making this rookie year a positive one and to give me the experience to serve as your next president. I look forward to continuing our fine organization in the right direction and have committed to making it grow stronger in membership numbers and year round positive communications.

I encourage the continuing access of our website and the sharing of your experience with other NIOA members by submitting stories of interest to our newsletter. We are all here to help each other in those trying times and each member of the organization is only a phone call away.

Ball State, California State need your input ...

Survey based on PIOs' responses

Ball State University is working with DHS and FEMA to develop a training program on advanced crisis communication for emergency communications professionals and is surveying public information officers from all public safety disciplines on their needs. For additional information about the project and the course timeline visit <http://www.bsue.edu/acct/>. To participate in the survey, go to: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/acct>.

California State University San Bernardino is conducting a survey of fire department public information officers on if, or how, they use social media in their work. The survey is anonymous and should take 10-15 minutes to complete. Copies of the completed survey will be available later in 2010 from Kevin Slusarski at slusarsk@csusb.edu. To take the survey, go to <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/LX97Z92>



Boden Retires

NIOA Past President Bob Boden (2005-06) retired from the Suffolk County, New York Police Department on April 5 after 29 years of service. Bob's friends and colleagues celebrated his retirement in New York at a party on June 9. Retired Suffolk County Police Sgt. Vin Ward presented Bob with a plaque from the NIOA recognizing, "with grateful appreciation his friendship, support and commitment to the NIOA."

Detroit chief resigns following reality-TV controversies



WARREN EVANS

Detroit Police Chief Warren Evans has resigned.

Evans came under criticism from Mayor Dave Bing after detectives, using a no-knock warrant, threw a flash grenade inside and burst through the door. At some point a police gun discharged, and a bullet fatally struck a 7-year-old girl. A camera crew from A&E's "The First 48" was tagging along, leading to speculation from some quarters that the flash-bang may have been used for dramatic effect.

Following the incident Bing banned reality television crews from tagging along with police, and chided Evans for not telling him about the practice of allowing TV cameramen to join officers on raids.

Evans' resignation came on the same day as a local TV station, WXYZ-TV, aired part of a six-minute video that Evans used to pitch a reality show about himself called "The Chief".

The clip showed Evans gripping a semi-automatic rifle, standing in front of crumbling Michigan Central Depot, star-

ing down a camera and declaring that he'll do "whatever it takes" to take his city back from crime, according to *The Detroit News*.

Bing said he requested Evans' resignation because of a "combination of issues" that troubled him.

"There were certain events that happened, certain decisions that were made over a period of time that led us to this decision," Bing said.

The NIOA News welcomes the following members to its ranks:

- Daniel Akerman
Escambia County Public Safety, Pensacola, FL
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- Armando Avina
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- Courtney Rice
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- Edwin Ritter
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See WELCOME, page 8

Public Information and The Unthinkable

Message may be the same for all, but ability to process will surely vary

By KAREN TERRILL
NIOA Member and
Media Survival Group president

I came across two quotes recently that stopped me cold. One was validating and one was stunning. They both pertain to public information and they are both from a new book; “The Unthinkable” by Amanda Ripley, a senior writer for *Time* magazine. This book should be required reading for anyone who is involved in emergency response, especially PIOs.



KAREN TERRILL

The focus of the book is why some people survive a crisis and some don't. The book is rich with information about how the human brain processes messages during a crisis and then directs the body to respond. But it reads more like a well-written case study, actually, dozens of well-written case studies.

It takes you inside the stairwells of the World Trade Center, into the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City, to fires, floods and airplane crashes. It isn't grisly or voyeuristic. In many ways, it is uplifting and reassuring about the nature of human beings to survive and help others to survive.

Back to those quotes:

Quote No. 1 – “I think (Hurricane) Camille killed more people during (Hurricane) Katrina than it did in 1969.”

– Max Mayfield, director of the National Hurricane Center

Quote No. 2 – “Since 9/11 the U.S. government has sent over \$23 billion to states and cities in the name of homeland security. Almost none of that money has gone toward intelligently enrolling regular people like you and me in the cause. Why don't we tell people what to do when the nation is on Orange Alert instead of telling them to be afraid? Why does every firefighter in Casper, Wyoming (pop. 50,632) have an \$1,800 HAZMAT suit – but we don't each have a statistically derived ranking of the hazards we actually face, and a smart, creative plan for dealing with them?”

– Amanda Ripley

You can probably guess it was the first quote that was stunning to me.

The second quote validated what many of us



New Orleans Firefighter, Autrey Plaisance, K9 Search and Rescue handler, Pat Tuholske and her yellow labrador retriever, Finn search homes for missing people in the Lower 9th Ward following devastating hurricane Katrina. FEMA photo/Andrea Booher

have been thinking and saying for years. As PIOs we have always known that more money needs to be spent on public information. People can die due to a lack of information or the belief in wrong information.

That leads me to explain Quote No. 1: The majority of people who stayed in their homes during Katrina and drowned in their attics had one thing in common, they were old. They had been middle-aged when Hurricane Camille went through New Orleans in 1969.

Like Katrina, Camille was a Category 5 storm, and these people had lived through it. Many of them told their families that they didn't want to evacuate. They could live through Katrina just like they lived through Camille.

But according to “The Unthinkable,” since Camille, “rapid development had destroyed much of the wetlands that had provided a natural barrier against storm surge.”

The reader is left to wonder how many lives might have been saved if those people had that piece of information, and of course, if they be-

lieved it. I imagined a team of PIOs creating an aggressive information campaign to drive home that single message to these people.

Experienced PIOs know the importance of a

simple, powerful message ... a message that is crafted specifically for a particular group with deliberate attention to their state of mind during a crisis.

I wasn't there so I don't know if there was an effort to do this. But the after-action report seems to indicate that this single issue was a cause of multiple fatalities.

“The Unthinkable” tells the reader what PIOs already know ... we must consider how people think during a crisis, and treat them accordingly. We are often told that we should not release this or that information because we don't want people to panic. But, as Ms. Ripley points out, people hardly ever panic, in fact, the first response to fright is usually freezing up, or what she calls the “denial phase.”

We have a “normalcy bias,” meaning we expect everything to be the way it always is, so that when we hear an alarm or someone yells fire, or the ground begins to shake, we don't run screaming. We stop and consider, and mill around and talk to others and delay our actions, sometimes for extensive periods of time.

This book is filled with case studies such as both World Trade Center bombings and Hurricane Katrina in which people died due to lack of information, or faith in wrong information.

As PIOs, we are not just practitioners. I believe we should also be advisers. Please consider reading this book, and passing it on to your emergency response coordinators. I think your communities will be safer for it.

Karen Terrill is a member of NIOA. She is the president and lead trainer of Media Survival Group, contracting with the U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security for PIO Team Training. You may reach her at: Karen@pioteams.com.

Region 3 co-director resigns post



ROBERT THOMAS

Region 3 Co-Director Robert Thomas with Harford County Government in Bel Air, Md., has resigned his NIOA position.

Unfortunately, Bob has been unable to attend the last few conferences due to budget restraints and felt he should give up his position as a regional co-director. Although saddened by his decision, the Board understands his reasoning and we wish him well and thank him for his years of service.

Bob remains a champion for the association and intends to continue his membership with us. The Board has decided to allow Adam Bernstein to serve as the regional director for the entire region.

CLEARWATER

NIOA 2010



Hostetter keynote speaker

Kathy Hostetter will be the keynote speaker at during the NIOA's Annual Business Luncheon on Tuesday, Aug. 31. She will be speaking on "Building Strong Relationships With Your Local Media."

A native of Fort Wayne, Ind., and a graduate of Ball State University, Hostetter is currently the news director at WAVE-TV in Louisville, Ky., a position she accepted earlier this year. Prior to



K. HOSTETTER

that she served as news director at WAVY-TV and Fox 43 in Portsmouth, Va., a position she held since 2005.

During her career she's done it all, from running cameras to overnight shifts to producing in Illinois, Michigan, Indiana and California. She has won numerous awards and citations for her newsrooms' work, including an Emmy.

While in Portsmouth she also co-chaired the Hampton Roads Emergency Services Media Council (HRESMC), an outlet that fosters good working relationships between print and broadcast media and public safety and law enforcement outlets.

See ya' in
Clearwater



Allen, Laud seek VP seat

Delegates to the 2010 Training Conference in Clearwater will elect a new vice president. The candidates are Chuck Allen with the Nevada Highway Patrol and Joe Laud with the City of Houston Office of Emergency Management.



CHUCK ALLEN



JOE LAUD

Dollar Rent A Car Group Rates

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Dollar Rent A Car offers price break to NIOA conference attendees

Dollar Rent A Car is offering special prices for those attending the NIOA conference in Clearwater. The prices are good at both the Tampa and Clearwater/St.Pete airports.

Benefits

- Unlimited mileage on all vehicles

- Complimentary additional driver(s)
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- Rates valid at all Florida Dollar locations
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age, present a valid driver's license, and meet regular rental requirements.

- Group rates and benefits are valid in Florida only.
- Group rates may not be used in conjunction with any other offer.

The NIOA Corporate Discount Code is CM2361.



JOURNALISM: SPJ's Code of Ethics sets the stage for today's reporters

Cont. from page 1

Jon Stewart of “*The Daily Show*,” of course, who’s been quoted as saying that he and his team “travel in fake ethics.” Ironically, Stewart has pulled the covers on innumerable journalistic faux pas and is perceived as one of the most credible on-air figures in America.

In 21st Century communications, of course, we have traditional media and non-traditional media (e.g., social media), the latter (unless associated with a traditional media outlet) totally ungoverned by any ethics code.

But, if you understand the Code, you can go back to a reporter, an editor, a news director or an editorial board, and say, “Hey, this practice of yours is a violation of the SPJ’s Code of Ethics. We sure you don’t mean to do that – do you?” All non-journalists involved with news development – sources, spokespersons, PR representatives – must become assertive endorsers and users of the Code to which journalists allegedly subscribe.

If we don’t do that, we’re saying, “Go ahead, do me harm, I’ll just whine about it.” Or as Stewart might put it, “How far do you want me to bend over?” We’re enabling the behavior we abhor.

The Code is divided into four main sections:

- *Seek Truth and Report It*
- *Minimize Harm*
- *Act Independently*
- *Be Accountable*

I am going to print every bullet point in the Code and, when applicable, follow it in with my italicized commentary, to include how it might apply to real-life ethical violations that I’ve witnessed or had reported to me (by multiple independent sources, of course!). And, in the interest of my own ethical disclosure, please note that I am writing this as an editorial, an opinion piece (see the Code on that subject).

Here, then, is the balance of the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics, with my comments. If you see no commentary, it’s because I had nothing to add, but that doesn’t preclude the possibility that each tenet of the Code might be useful in challenging media coverage.

Seek Truth and Report It

Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

Journalists should:

- **Test the accuracy** of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.

Commentary: the guidance I was given by my first mentor in journalism, columnist Jack Anderson, was to use “multiple independent

sources in a position to know” to test accuracy. That latter phrase can mean, literally, a source is a witness. But it can also mean the source is an expert (whose credentials have been verified, an easy thing for a reporter to mess up when in a hurry) or a document that in and of itself needs to be established as authentic (it’s way too easy to forge documents with a computer!). Challenge journalists on this, ask them how they tested the accuracy of their information.

- **Diligently seek out subjects** of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.

Commentary: The following are just a few examples of how this often isn’t done:

- ▶▶ Calling the main switchboard of an organization after hours and making no further attempt (e.g., going to the organization’s website) to identify a media contact (if you don’t put your media contact on your website, then it’s your problem).

- ▶▶ Contacting a source 30 minutes or less before deadline.

- ▶▶ Intentionally avoiding an organization’s or individual’s known PR contact and then claiming that the desired spokesperson was unavailable for comment.

- ▶▶ Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources’ reliability.

Commentary: A certain environmental organization, in years past, engaged in the infamous practice of quoting “John Jones, Ph.D.” as if he were an expert on the relevant science. The media went right along with that charade until those being criticized did some research and found that “Dr. Jones” degree was in history or some other completely unrelated-to-the-story field.

- **Always question sources’ motives** before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.

Commentary: It’s always risky to speak “off-the-record” or “not for attribution,” but, if you do, I strongly recommend getting the agreement in writing (at least e-mail). Or you may find yourself at the wrong end of a convenient misunderstanding about what you agreed.

- **Make certain that headlines**, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.

Commentary: You can really hoist a news organization on this petard. Headlines and news teases, in particular, are seldom written by the people who reported the story and are designed to draw your attention to the story, often at the damaging expense of one or more

subjects of the article. I have seen articles that, when read in depth, seemed fairly innocuous, yet to read the headline you would believe that horrendous crimes have been committed – by you or your organization. Guess what the public remembers?

- **Never distort the content** of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.

Commentary: News organizations should have made some good faith effort to ensure that photographic material provided by outside sources has not been doctored or manipulated.

- **Avoid misleading re-enactments** or staged news events. If re-enactment is necessary to tell a story, label it.

- **Avoid undercover or other surreptitious** methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story.

Commentary: I believe this should apply to:

- ▶▶ *Ambush interviews if used as the media’s first approach.*

- ▶▶ *Undercover consumer investigations conducted before the target organization has been directly approached for information.*

- ▶▶ *Any type of sneaky journalism when the information being sought is not, in fact, “vital to the public.”*

- **Never plagiarize.**

- **Tell the story of the diversity** and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.

- **Examine their own cultural values** and avoid imposing those values on others.

Commentary: This applies, for example, to the reality that many media organizations demonstrate a clear anti-business bias, i.e., if a business is being criticized, the default assumption is that the critic is right. That’s a clear violation of the SPJ’s Code. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a consumer reporter, for example, write a piece that said, “Mrs. Smith told us that she’d been ripped off by The West Company, but our investigation determined that Mrs. Smith was lying. If you come to us with false information, consumers, we’ll report on you instead!” There are other types of cultural value issues, of course, such as blatantly favoring one political party’s viewpoints while claiming to be an impartial news organization.

- **Avoid stereotyping** by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.

- **Support the open exchange** of views, even views they find repugnant.

- **Give voice to the voiceless;** official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.

Commentary: When it comes to complaints, consumers often have a louder voice – with the media – than businesses or other organizations. That’s a good thing for consumers who have been wronged, but a bad thing for organizations about whom some consumers are making false allegations. Real adherence to this principle should, I believe, mean that the “voiceless” get an equal voice, not a superior voice. Additionally, some sources of information, such as the Better Business Bureau, are portrayed as being a lot more official than they actually are and, as a result, many “average citizens” think the BBB is a governmental agency instead of a member-supported private organization with its own credibility issues.

- **Distinguish between advocacy** and news reporting. Commentary and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.

Commentary: This is another area in which many media outlets do a dismal job of disclosure and policing, particularly when it comes to columnists. For our edification, The Boston Globe, provides this description of the difference between a columnist and a news reporter:

A reporter gathers facts and information on an event of public interest and then presents them in a readable style to inform the reader. The reporter is supposed to provide objective observation about events that editors deem newsworthy. Reporters are often assigned to “beats,” or particular areas, such as business, politics, energy or education.

A columnist gives opinions, usually his or her own. A columnist is expected to gather accurate information, just as a reporter does, and then comment on that information. A columnist has more latitude and license than a reporter and is not constrained by the rule of impartiality that governs news writing. While they are subject to the editing and approval of one or more editors, columnists can write just about what they please, as long as it remains within the boundaries of good taste and public acceptability, as defined by the paper.

However, knowing full well that most readers aren’t aware of these definitions, many columnists present their opinions as if they were news. It is incumbent on both the columnist and the publisher to educate readers in a more transparent manner – with each column.

- **Distinguish news from advertising** and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.

- **Recognize a special obligation** to ensure

'If a media **inquiry** appears to be **heading** in a **direction** that will **harm** your **reputation** and/or **bottom line**, you **certainly qualify** as **someone** who 'may be **affected adversely** by news **coverage**.'

that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

Minimize Harm

Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.

Journalists should:

- **Show compassion** for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.

Commentary: If a media inquiry appears to be heading in a direction that will harm your reputation and/or bottom line, you certainly qualify as someone who "may be affected adversely by news coverage." And you may also be an "inexperienced source." Yet I can't recall a single time a reporter appeared to genuinely "show compassion" for my crisis-impacted clients when they were on the hot seat. Call them on it!

- **Be sensitive when seeking** or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.

Commentary: So if your factory has just burned down, friends and co-workers killed or injured, and the TV crews want to get in the face of survivors, this tenet lets you say no and explain why.

- **Recognize that gathering** and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.

Commentary: The next time a reporter starts getting arrogantly demanding on the phone, you have recourse.

- **Recognize that private people** have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.

- **Show good taste.** Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.

Commentary: Please. Probably 90 percent of the media violates this one.

- **Be cautious about identifying** juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.

- **Be judicious about naming** criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.

Commentary: Unfortunately, in the rush to "scoop" the competition, media outlets often strain the definition of "judicious."

- **Balance a criminal suspect's** fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.

Act Independently

Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.

Journalists should:

- **Avoid conflicts of interest**, real or perceived.

Commentary: For example, I'm aware of a columnist whose sister worked for an organization related to one subject of a story she was covering, but that relationship wasn't disclosed until external pressure was brought to bear.

- **Remain free of associations** and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.

Commentary: For example, wearing a political campaign button or any other form of political partisanship on the job.

- **Refuse gifts, favors, fees**, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.

Commentary: I know of a government employee who also wrote for notoriously conservative publications and constantly used her media pulpit in favor of her boss, whom she knew was soon to campaign for state office.

- **Disclose unavoidable conflicts.**

Commentary: See the first bullet point in this section.

- **Be vigilant and courageous** about holding those with power accountable.

- **Deny favored treatment** to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.

Commentary: I think this principle is generally well-observed with regard to advertisers, but when the "special interest" is, for example, a major lobbying group whose viewpoints support the political leaning of a specific media

outlet, I'm less confident that favored treatment won't be given.

- **Be wary of sources offering** information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news.

Be Accountable

Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other.

Journalists should:

- **Clarify and explain news coverage** and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.

- **Encourage the public** to voice grievances against the news media.

Commentary: Have you seen any communication from your favorite media outlets inviting you to do this (except, perhaps, buried somewhere it's not likely to be seen by most)?

- **Admit mistakes and correct** them promptly.

Commentary: To truly correct a mistake, the correction must have the same prominence as the mistake. If someone is damaged by mistaken information in a page 1 newspaper story, but the mistake is published on page 34, that is clearly not a true correction. It is merely technical compliance with this tenet and I'm sure it is not what the SPJ had in mind.

- **Expose unethical practices** of journalists and the news media.

Commentary: Media worldwide are quick to report the story when a reporter at some prominent newspaper is caught falsifying information, but how often do any of them report on the unethical practices of their own staff? It's up to us to push for this to happen more often.

- **Abide by the same high standards** to which they hold others.

Commentary: If a media outlet is getting preachy on a topic, it's worth looking to see if they're walking their talk on that subject and/or related topics. And this last bullet applies to you, if you intend to use the SPJ's Code of Ethics in the manner I suggest. Most professions have membership organizations that establish suggested or even mandatory ethics codes. Whether or not we are members of those organizations, it would behoove us to walk our talk as well before challenging others' ethics, else our glass houses shatter around us.

WHAT TO DO WITH CODE VIOLATIONS

The next time you perceive what you believe to be an ethical violation by a journalist reporting on you, your company or your client/customer, evaluate the violation in the context of the SPJ's Code. In many cases, you'll conclude that more than one tenet of the Code was violated.

Then:

1. **Write it out.** Outline the journalist or media outlet's behavior, what Code sections were violated, and why you think the behavior was a violation of those sections.

2. **Appeal to the media outlet.** For this you need someone who understands media relations and how to approach different types of media. In some cases, an appeal directly to a reasonable reporter may do the trick, in other cases you may have to take the issue "to the top," such as an editorial board.

3. **Evaluate feedback.** After your media appeal, do you still think there were violations? Did the media agree to make things right in a satisfactory manner? If so, congratulations, that's a "win." If not, see step 4.

4. **Fight back in the court of public opinion.** The traditional media no longer have the monopoly on communication with broad audiences. The Internet provides each of us with many ways to become our own publisher. Press releases are inexpensive or even free to distribute, depending on the service used. How many media outlets would like to see a news headline, prominent blog headline or Tweet with the message "The (name of city) Times refuses to comply with journalistic ethics code"? I'm sure your own PR consultants, working closely with legal counsel to keep them on the safe side of defamation laws, can come up with many effective tactics.

Hint: One such tactic is to put all allegations into a civil lawsuit, if there's any basis for filing one. Then you (and other media outlets) can quote directly from the complaint and face little risk of defaming anyone.

IN CLOSING

"If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem." (1960's activist Stokely Carmichael, although his wife is reported to have written the speech)

I have, on a small scale, begun to employ the SPJ's Code of Ethics on behalf of my clients. I intend to start doing that a lot more, effectively immediately. But it will take some critical mass of us doing the same thing to begin to have a long-term impact on the traditional media with which we interact.

Remember that the goal of crisis management is to avoid damage when we can, and minimize it even when we can't. We can and must start using this tool to achieve both of those goals.

Jonathan Bernstein is president of Bernstein Crisis Management, Inc., editor of the "Crisis Manager" newsletter and author of "Keeping the Wolves at Bay – Media Training." Contact: jonathan@bernsteincrisismanagement.com.

WELCOME: New members

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■ Hugh Tarpe
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■ R Weiner
Columbus Police, Columbus, OH
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■ Kimberly Zeh
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WAGA-TV Atlanta reporter George Franco was arrested and charged with battery for allegedly shoving and grabbing a member of a Pensacola beach clean-up crew. A BP contractor told police he advised Franco to stand outside the staging area, but Franco pushed him and walked passed him. The contractor told Franco several times to leave, then said he was going to call the sheriff's office. That's when witnesses say Franco grabbed the man's arm, spinning him around.

Former WSB-TV Atlanta investigative reporter Dale Cardwell was arrested DUI. Cardwell was pulled over after he sat thru a green light cycle. He was arrested after he refused to submit to a Breathalyzer test. Cardwell left WSB in 2007 to run for the U.S. Senate.

Former WTSP-Ch. 10 Tampa/St. Petersburg news anchor Jennifer Howe, 44, was arrested twice in the same week recently, accused of drunkenly yelling at an officer, then ripping up her neigh-

bor's plants and harassing them because they testified in her child-custody case. Howe's ex-husband, former WTSP anchor M.W. "Pat" Minarcin, subpoenaed the testimony of his ex-wife's neighbors.

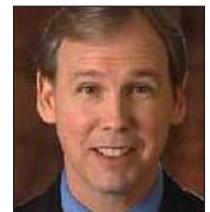
WTNH Connecticut television personality Desiree Fontaine, who brings viewers morning traffic reports and hosts CT Style, was charged with shoplifting at Sears. Police said Fontaine, 33, allegedly tried to take \$104.98 worth of merchandise.

She later resigned her position and the charges were dismissed in exchange for community service.

Bowling Green, KY, Daily News Managing Editor Mike Alexieff resigned following his arrest for DUI. Alexieff, 50, took a tough stance on publishing the DUI's of public officials. In an editorial, Alexieff once wrote, "Driving under the influence is the leading cause of fatal accidents on Kentucky roads. And yes, if I get a DUI, you can be assured an article about it will be in the newspaper."



G. FRANCO



D. CARDWELL



J. HOWE



D. FONTAINE



M. ALEXIEFF

