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Tenets of Responsible Student Journalism: Finding Common Ground

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When an administrator expresses support for responsible journalism, when an adviser expects students to produce a responsible publication, when the editor tells that staff how to act responsibly, what characteristics do all three have in mind? What common qualities do they expect from students practicing Responsible Journalism?

On the surface, each may put a premium on something different.

- The administrator may want a publication with content that shows the school in a positive light, that promotes the good news and overlooks the bad (e.g., low test scores or a poor football record). Is that the product of responsible journalism?
- The teacher may want a publication that reflects students' technical proficiency—such mechanics as spelling and punctuation—to quell criticism from peers or parents. But is that the measure of responsible journalism?
- And the editor may want to preserve tradition with a publication of predictable content free of controversy and sure to avoid administrative interference. Does a publication that pleases school officials reflect responsible journalism?

But Responsible Journalism must get below the surface. Instead of guiding a staff towards Responsible Journalism, these three concerns focus on Irresponsible Journalism, defining it as a grammatically sloppy story on a controversial issue that reflect poorly on the school. How many student media stakeholders—including administrators, advisers, student journalists (and their constituents—community members, parents, teachers and students) would agree that this will lead towards ethical decision-making?

The goal of responsible, ethical journalism is not met by simply identifying specific stories that cannot be written or reporting practices that should never be followed. Press responsibility is a layered, textured process, not one-dimensional challenge. And a satisfying resolution certainly will not come from a series of “don’ts” to shape the journalist. Guidelines are needed to lead journalists towards responsible publication.

A primary objective of journalists—whether they’re professionals or students—is to thoroughly

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gather and fairly, accurately and completely deliver content that serves their audience. This quest requires finding common ground—shared values and ethical guidelines that all stakeholders can agree will help achieve this goal.

To that end, we propose a paradigm for responsible journalism, for ethical decision-making. A sound, workable model is neither infallible nor freestanding. It cannot assure free, effective, educationally-sound student media that serve the school community. Dedicated advisers, student journalists and school officials must aspire to perform professional in several related ways.

We choose to show that common threads of Responsibility connect school officials, student journalists and news-media professionals. The guidelines described here reflect the belief that student journalists and school officials share a commitment to the educational objectives of the school. Likewise, responsible student journalists are expected to comply with the sound practice of dedicated professional journalists. And the expectations of administrators have much in common with the aspirations of their faculty, students...and school publication staffs.

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