

*Revised  
May 2000*

## **CODE OF ETHICS OF ETSU STUDENT PUBLICATIONS**

The Code of Ethics of ETSU Student Publications is largely derived from the Associated Collegiate Press Model Code of Ethics for Collegiate Journalists (1999, Albert DeLuca and Tom Rolnicki, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Smaller portions of this document were also taken from the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics and the previous Code of Ethics of ETSU Student Publications. The code contains standards of conduct and moral judgments. Some points are specific and ideally inflexible; others may be less rigid due to extenuating circumstances. Some are based on law. A code can bring desirable uniformity to some degree to the news gathering process and in the group's search for truth. This code should be used by individuals to measure their work, and also by the university community to evaluate the publication as a whole.

### **1. Responsibility**

A publication draws its share of public attention, and with that comes a certain amount of sway over opinion as well as control – by reporting or not reporting on events. Journalists who use that power for selfish reasons are adulterating a high trust. Public welfare and responsibility to that public should take precedence over a publication's rights. While a journalist has a right to attract and hold readers, if a tantalizing story might hurt a portion of the public, the publication should place its own interests second.

### **2. Freedom of the Press**

Freedom of the press is to be guarded as a vital right of mankind. It is the unquestionable right to discuss whatever is not explicitly forbidden by law, including the wisdom of any restrictive statute.

### **3. Free Travel**

To remain as free of influence or obligation to report a story, the journalist, in pursuit of a story, should not accept free travel, accommodations or meals related to travel. For convenience, sports reporters may travel on team charters, but the publications should pay the cost of the transportation and related expenses. The same pay-as-you-go policy should apply to non-sports reporting as well, including businesses and governments. Free travel and accommodations that are non-coverage related and provided by a vendor may be accepted if the primary purpose is for education or training and is related to the fulfillment of an agreement or contract.

### **4. Gifts**

Gifts should not be accepted. Any gift should be returned to the sender or sent to a charity. If the gift is of no significant value, such as a desk trinket, small food item or pen, the staff member may retain the gift. As a guideline, if the value is under \$10, the gift may be kept. More than one gift in one year, even if under \$10, from the same giver, may not be accepted.

## **5. Free tickets, Passes, Discounts**

If money is available, staffers assigned to cover a sporting event, lecture, play, concert, movie or other entertainment event should pay for admission. Free tickets or passes may be accepted by staff members assigned to cover an event or by those attending for legitimate news purposes. Press facilities at these events may only be used by staff members who are assigned to cover the event. Free tickets or passes may be accepted by staff members for personal use only if tickets are available on the same complimentary basis to non-journalists.

## **6. Membership in Campus Organizations**

Staffers may not cover a campus organization they belong to, or participate in any editorial or business decisions regarding that organization. Staffers may provide story leads about the organizations to which they belong to other staffers. Staffers should report their memberships to their supervising editor.

## **7. Relationships and Coverage**

Staffers must declare conflicts and avoid involvement in stories dealing with members of their families. Staff members should not cover – in words, photographs or artwork – or make news judgments about family members or persons with whom they have a financial, adversarial or close sexual or platonic relationship.

## **8. Plagiarism of Words, Art, Other**

Plagiarism is prohibited and is illegal if the material is copyright protected. For the purposes of this code, plagiarism is defined as the word-for-word duplication of another person's writing and shall be limited to passages that contain distinctively personal thoughts, uniquely stylized phraseology or exclusive facts. A comparable prohibition applies to the use of graphics. Information obtained from a published work must be independently verified before it can be reported as a new, original story. This policy also forbids lifting verbatim paragraphs from a wire service without attribution or pointing out that wire stories were used in compiling the story. Material that is published online, on the Internet, should be treated in the same way as if it were published in more traditional broadcast media.

## **9. Fabrication of Any Kind**

The use of composite characters or imaginary situations or characters will not be allowed in news or feature stories. A columnist may, occasionally, use such an approach in developing a piece, but it must be clear to the reader that the person or situation is fictional and that the column is commentary and not reporting. The growth of narrative story development storytelling devices means that reporters and editors should be especially careful to not mix fact and fiction, and not embellish fact with fictional details, regardless of their significance.

## **10. Electronically Altered Photos**

Electronically altering the content of photos for news and general feature stories or as stand-alone news and feature photos is not allowed. Exceptions to this would be adjustments to contrast and similar technical enhancements that don't affect the truthfulness of the subject and context of the subject or the scene. Content may be altered for creative purposes as a special effect for a feature story if the caption or creditline includes that fact and if an average reader

would not mistake the photo for reality. These photos are usually tagged as photo illustrations. In a news medium, readers expect photos and stories to be truthful.

#### **11. Photo Illustration and Re-enactments**

Set-ups or posed scenes may be used if the average reader will not be misled or if the caption or creditline tells readers that it is a photo illustration or a re-enactment or re-staging of an event, including award presentations. Recording the original action is always preferred.

#### **12. Use of Photographs of Victims of Accidents, Fires, Natural Disasters**

Photos have a tremendous impact on readers. The question of privacy versus the public's right to know should be considered. The line between good and bad taste and reality and sensationalism is not always easy to draw. Care should be taken to maintain the dignity of the subject as much as possible without undermining the truth of the event. In making a final decision on a photo of this type, an editor should consider: Do the readers need information from this photo that helps explain the event better than words or another photo? Who is hurt by the publication of this photo?

#### **13. Reporting Names, Addresses of Crime Victims**

Staffers need to know the state laws that govern the publication of the names of crime victims. Customarily, the names of rape victims are not published. Victims of nonsexual crimes may be identified, but the publication has a responsibility to give some protection to the victims such as giving imprecise addresses. With the exception of major crimes, predetermined by the editor, an arrested person is not named until charges are filed. However, to avoid a subjective list of exceptions, it is acceptable to withhold all names, regardless of the crime, until charges are filed.

#### **14. Scrutiny of a Public Person's Life**

Conflicts exist between a person's desire for privacy and the public good or the public's right to know about a public person's life. Persons who freely choose to become public celebrities or public servants should expect a greater level of scrutiny of their life than a private person, even a private person who suddenly is involved in a public situation. Staffers should make judgments based on the real news value of the situation, common sense and decency. Reporters and photographers should not badger a person who has made it clear that he or she does not want to be interviewed or photographed. One exception is those who are involved in criminal activity or in court. Publishing intimate details of a person's life, such as their health or sexual activities, should be done with extreme care and only if the facts are important for completeness of a story and reflect in a significant way upon the person's public life.

#### **15. Profane, Vulgar Words, Explicit Sexual Language**

The primary audience of a college publication is adults. Profane and vulgar words are a part of everyday conversation, but not generally used for scholarly or general audience writing. During the interview stage of news gathering, staffers will encounter interviewees who use words viewed as vulgar and profane. The staff may publish these words if the words are important to the reader's understanding of the situation – the reality of life – or if the words help establish the character of the interviewee. The staff may decide to limit references to prevent the vulgar or profane language from overshadowing the other, more important facts of the story. Though they

may be vulgar or profane, individual words are not obscene. Explicit language – but not vulgar, street language – describing sexual activities and human body parts and functions should be used for accurate reporting of health stories and, in a more limited way, for sexual crime stories.

#### **16. Sexist Language**

Staffers should avoid sexist labels and descriptive language. Replace such language with neutral terms and descriptions.

#### **17. Negative Stereotyping**

Staffers should take care in writing to avoid applying commonly thought but usually erroneous group stereotypes to individuals who are a member of a particular group. Generalizations, often based upon stereotypes, can be misleading and inaccurate. In a broader sense, writers, photographers and artists should avoid more subtle stereotyping in their selection of interviewees and subjects of photographs or illustrations. Some examples of negative stereotypes: unmarried, black teen welfare mothers; unemployed, alcohol-using Native Americans; overweight, long-haired white biker outlaws; effeminate gays; inarticulate, “dumb” blonde women. It is also advisable to avoid sexual stereotyping in choice of subjects for stories, photographs and illustrations on sports, or political or social issues such as equal rights.

#### **18. Use of Racial, Ethnic, Religious, Sexual Orientation, Other Group Identifiers**

Identification of a person as a member of any population group should be limited to those cases when that membership is essential for the reader’s complete understanding of the story; it should be done with great care so as not to perpetuate negative or positive group stereotyping. When identifiers are used, it is important that the correct one be used. Some examples of identifiers: Hispanic, Jew, lesbian, Italian, person with AIDS (PWA), physically challenged, hearing impaired.

#### **19. False Identity, Stolen Documents, Concealed Recording, Eavesdropping**

In the ordinary course of reporting, no staffers shall misrepresent themselves as anything other than representatives of the publication. In extraordinary circumstances, when an editor judges that the information cannot be gotten in any other way and the value of that information to the readers is important, the editor may authorize a misrepresentation. Staffers may not steal or knowingly receive stolen materials regardless of their importance to a story. Except in situations judged by an editor as extraordinary, a staffer shall not record an interview or meeting without the interviewee’s permission or the obvious placement of a recording device (not hidden) at the start of the interview or meeting in which case the interviewee or newsmakers do not object and are aware of the presence of the recording device. Committing an illegal act to eavesdrop on a source is not allowed. State laws on the use of recording devices should be checked.

#### **20. Granting and Preserving Confidentiality to Sources**

A reporter should not promise confidentiality to a source without the permission of the editor. Confidentiality should only be given if there is a real danger that physical, emotional or financial harm will come to the source if his or her name were revealed. The editor should have all the facts and the source’s name before any decision is made. The editor should know of any laws pertaining to confidentiality and disclosure before a decision is made. A reporter should

make every attempt to get the same information from another source who agrees to be named since the goal is to attribute all information to a specific source for all stories.

## **21. Anonymous Sources**

Generally, anonymous sources are not used in stories. Information that comes from an unnamed or unknown source should not be used unless it can be verified through another, known source. If two independent sources verify the information and both are unnamed, an editor may decide to publish the information with careful consideration for the need for immediacy and the news value of the information. The source may be identified generally as one associated with an agency to give some degree of credibility to the information. *Note: See Confidentiality.* The danger exists that the reader might not believe the information if sources are not given; the publication's credibility might suffer; information obtained later from a named source and verified might disprove the information given by the unnamed or unknown sources.

## **22. No Response from Subject**

If the subject of a story does not respond to a reporter's inquiry, the reporter may use the failure to respond in the story. However, use the verb "refused" to respond cautiously because of its connotation. It is often better to use "declined" or "would not respond." If the subject cannot be reached, it is acceptable to say that the subject was not available for comment. The difference between not responding and not available for comment should be clear to the reader.

## **23. Sources on the Internet**

Reporters who use the Internet and e-mail to interview sources should identify themselves immediately. The source should be told that the information given is for a story. Information from Internet chat rooms and bulletin boards should not be used except as background or if it is used, it should be attributed as "from the Internet." Since some information on the Internet may not be accurate, verification of facts through another source is especially important.

## **24. Corrections**

An inaccuracy is never knowingly published. If any error is found, the publication is obligated to correct the error as soon as possible, regardless of the source of the error. A consistent location for the publication of corrections is recommended. It should be clearly and prominently labeled as a correction. Clarifications may also be labeled and published in the same manner. For online publications, a corrections and clarifications link could be on the home page.

## **25. Separation of Reporting from Commentary**

To help the reader separate fact-based reporting from commentary, in the form of personal columns, editorials, analysis and similar opinion writing, all commentary should be labeled or somehow clearly and consistently identified as opinion, especially when it outside the editorial or op-ed pages and mixed with fact-based reporting.

## **26. Headlines**

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.

## **27. Influence of Advertisers**

Editors should guard against attempts made by advertisers and others in the publication's business office to influence the editorial content of the print or online publication. The editorial staff reserves the right to make all decisions about any editorial coverage an advertiser may get in the publication, including advertising supplements. Readers should not perceive that an advertiser is getting favorable editorial mention simply because the advertiser has bought space in the publication.

Exchanges of advertisements for "news" stories put the impartiality and propriety of a publication in question. It is essentially taking money to publish news. Passes, gift certificates, recordings, books or other token payments or gifts of any kind will not be accepted by an individual in exchange for an ad.

## **28. Acceptance of Reader Feedback**

Editors and reporters should invite reader feedback and participation in the publication. Reaction by readers to what has been published should be invited through all methods of communication: paper, e-mail, phone, fax and in-person visits. Staff members should be careful to not discourage reader feedback.