

# Who Is Responsible for Guarding Against Ethical Breaches?

Who is responsible for guarding against ethical breaches? The short answer is this:

Everyone is responsible, starting with the person gathering the news. The reporter must be both honest and well-informed about ethics and law. However, both ethics and law are too important to leave to just one person.

While all members of the journalist's community must guard the publication or broadcast's integrity, newsroom leaders have a *direct* responsibility to guard that integrity. These leaders are **gatekeepers**, that is, people who have the power to send a story back for additional work, who may alter it before it is broadcast or published or who may spike (or kill) a story, that is, withhold it from publication. These gatekeepers usually include the editor-in-chief, editorial board, content editors, copy editor and online editor.

## Editor-in-Chief

The editor-in-chief (EIC) is the first guardian of the publication's reputation and ethics, including balance, fairness, objectivity and responsibility to the community. Story ideas come from many places, including the work of enterprising journalists and the audience, but journalists and the audience do not dictate the content. Ultimately, the EIC is responsible for what to cover and what to ignore and how a story plays. The term *plays* refers to the emphasis a story is given: which section it goes in, how prominently it is covered, how long it is or how much time it gets, and whether the story is potentially big enough to deserve alternative story forms, interactive elements, audio and video, photography and sidebars.

The EIC will also make the final decision—in consultation with the adviser—about challenging ethical dilemmas such as conflicts of interest, promises of anonymity, and how your news organization covers potentially sensitive topics. For most school papers, he may also make final decisions on advertising. His conversations with the editorial board help form his decisions.

## Editorial Board

The editorial board includes all the student leaders and is headed by the editor-in-chief. The editorial board may help the EIC make management decisions, including how many pages to print, when stories are broadcast, and whether you need a chocolate recipe in the Saint Valentine's Day edition. It also discusses difficult ethical decisions. Do you accept an advertisement from a religious organization or a school board candidate? Do you identify the students or the Twitter accounts in an article about local cyberbullying? Do you allow the campus police officer to check a story for accuracy? Do you need a news article on the school restrooms before you publish an opinion piece about them? Does playing varsity basketball create a conflict of interest for the reporter assigned to cover the frosh-soph team? Though the EIC may make the final decision or ask the board to vote, intelligent discussion improves decision making.

## Content Editors

The content editors' areas of responsibility usually include some variation on this traditional list: opinion, entertainment, sports, news. Large or specialized news organizations may have content editors in charge of additional or more specialized fields. For instance, a sports publication may have an editor for each sport, or it may have one editor for feature stories, another for game coverage and a third for individual or off-campus sports news. Another editor may cover the business of sports.

Content editors should have multiple opportunities to monitor a story as it develops. They assign stories and deadlines, review the reporter's background research, suggest additional sources and talk with the reporter as the story develops. This is done both through online document sharing programs and in face-to-face conferences. The content editor organizes the team that creates multimedia coverage and may sketch the package for a story to include sidebars, graphics, photos and hyperlinks to primary documents. She may write the headlines and teasers for the story, guarding against misleading or sensational language.

But a content editor's first job is to represent and protect the audience. As such, she is a gatekeeper with the power to reject—or send back for more work—any story that is ethically questionable or that does not serve the audience well.

A reader cannot ask the reporter, "Are those his exact words? Did he really say that?" But an editor can and should. The reporter should be ready to show her reporter's notebook to her editor. If the time, place, speaker and words are not all exactly accurate, the editor tells the reporter to rewrite the story.

A viewer cannot ask the videographer and the reporter, "Did you really interview her right after the fire, or was that staged?" An editor can and should. The reporter should be able to explain how and where the scene was videoed. It may be uncomfortable to question a friend's reporting, but the editor's job is to protect the audience. The editor may tell the reporter to disclose the real situation to the viewer, or she may decide a staged interview cannot be shown. To protect the audience and the news organization, she may decide to spike the whole story.

A reporter writes, "Sophomore Angie Markham pounds the alarm to silence and then staggers to the bathroom, pulls on a pale blue leotard and a set of sweats, knots her shoulder-length hair back into a severe bun, grabs her book bag and walks silently to the car where her mother waits with the heater running. It is 4:00 a.m." This is a "too good to be true" lead. The editor challenges it. "Were you there when her alarm went off? Were you there when she changed her clothes? Were you there when she went to the car?" If the answer is no, this delightful lead is fiction and does not belong in the news. The editor sends the story back to the reporter for a rewrite, this time without the fiction.

If the reporter is recalling what Angie says happens every morning, then the reporter needs to indicate that it is from an interview—"Angie said." Then the reporter may change it to the first person or put quotes around it. But the vivid details, "pounds the alarm to silence," "staggers to the bathroom," "severe bun," all suggest first-person observation and are misleading as currently written. Quote Angie, attribute Angie, but do not imply you saw it when you did not.

A content editor also pushes the reporter to answer the questions the audience will want to ask. If a reporter submits a dull or uninteresting lead, such as "Many teachers will be fired because of the new state budget," the content editor asks the reporter, "So what? Which teachers at our school? In the district? How many teachers? What will happen to their classes? When will they have to leave? Are they fired? Let go? Transferred? How about administrators? Will we lose any coaches or club advisers? How do the students feel about the loss?" The editor sends the story back for more reporting.

A content editor sometimes is asked to coach writers. Gatekeeping and coaching at the same time may be difficult. A content editor needs a "let nothing slide" attitude, but this may not be a productive attitude for a writing coach, who often suggests rather than commands. A writing coach *coaches*, that is, she helps the reporter develop his abilities as he develops a story. A writing coach helps a reporter find an interesting angle, write stronger leads, use quotations for greatest impact and always keep the language tight and interesting. Many news organizations separate the gatekeeper job of content editor from the position of a writing coach, and they have different staff members for these jobs.

A content editor is not a rewrite man. Historically, a rewrite man (or woman) was a journalist who did not go into the community to report news but took reports from others and crafted them into a story. In addition, she might rewrite a story if breaking news changed the angle the paper

needed to take. “Get me rewrite” is a cliché from many movies, notably “The Front Page” (1974). Modern electronic communications should lessen the need for a rewrite man because a reporter can update his own copy if new information changes a story before it is published.

Trying to rewrite and edit at the same time invites error and ethical breaches. A content editor should not create new copy or significantly rearrange the copy the reporter submits, though she may cut sections of it. The reporter knows the story best. An editor who did not report the story is likely to accidentally insert errors into the story or misquote sources or create false scenarios. The reporter either should make the changes the editor requires or explain why the changes would introduce errors or ethical problems. This may be done in a face-to-face story meeting, by phone or e-mail, or through online document sharing tools. A reporter has not submitted the story—and earned his byline—until all the revisions are done. A good editor does not do a reporter’s job for him.

## Copy Editor

The copy editor is often the final gatekeeper. In addition to performing proofreading tasks and applying Associated Press and the publication’s style, a copy editor checks each story for anything that could endanger the publication. The copy editor **fact checks**, that is, checks facts mentioned or implied in the article for accuracy using online and print resources as well as previous editions of the publication. Some errors simply embarrass the publication. That is bad enough. Other issues have legal and ethical implications. The copy editor worries about many things, including

- names and titles. Errors in identification can lead to suit for libel.
- libel, whether it’s in the story itself or in captions for photographs.
- trademark and copyright violations. Such violations can cost the publication.
- attribution and plagiarism. When writing does not match a reporter’s usual style, the copy editor may search for unattributed sources.
- biased or sexist language. References to sexual orientation, ethnic or racial heritage, disability, gender and religion should be both respectful and necessary to the story.

Some copy editors also write headlines, teasers, subheads and captions. Others copy-edit these after other editors have composed them. Headlines, captions and teasers must attract viewers and readers but not mislead them, so they need copy-editing as much or more than other parts of the story. Copy editors also review infographics, photo illustrations and links. Advertising designed by the staff also requires copy editing.

## Online Editor

An online editor may be the final gatekeeper, the person who actually publishes the article onto the website. This editor must have the technical expertise needed to publish clear, interesting and usable text, visuals, sound files and interactive elements online. In addition, the online editor must know how to do the jobs of a copy editor and a content editor if the story flow has not allowed these editors to review the work before it reaches the online editor. Whenever possible, robust online publications will provide for many people and multiple editors to see each story before it is published.

In addition to these gatekeepers, many other members of your staff will contribute to and safeguard the quality of your publication or broadcast. These may include peer responders, who ask many of the same questions that writing coaches and editors ask. When multiple writers, or a writer plus a photographer and audio recorder, work on a story, they can provide multiple checks for each other in both accuracy and ethics.