

Yes, It's Public Information – But Press Must be Responsible

By Jim Pumarlo

Newspapers are privileged to publish a variety of information due to state and federal laws. Without these rights, the pages would be void of content that is the everyday fabric of communities.

Marriages and divorces; traffic tickets; hiring, firing, discipline, salaries and much more about public employees; court dispositions; building permits; property taxes – these are just a sampling of vital public data.

But the fact that data are classified as public does not mean all readers welcome the dissemination. And authorities still may challenge the release of some data.

Equally important, the right to publish something is only half of the equation. Newspapers also must be responsible in coverage, especially when dealing with sensitive issues.

Determining – and defending – that responsibility is fairly straightforward when, for example, stories involve public bodies and elected officials. Even in those cases, however, newspapers must consider such things as placement of story, balance and accuracy. Perceived unfair treatment of individuals or organizations will give newspapers a black eye.

Editors and reporters should weigh their rights and responsibilities in pursuit of all stories. But those considerations are especially important when reporting on sensitive issues. It's worth an extra conversation in the newsroom.

Here are additional tips.

- Be accurate: If something cannot be confirmed, don't use it.
- Be fair: If someone levels charges against an individual, seek a response from the accused.
- Be consistent: If a story outlining alleged wrongdoing by someone appears on page 1, and later the person is cleared, the follow-up story should receive front-page treatment, too.
- Be conscious of placement: If a story will receive just as much attention whether it's on page 1 or page 9, err on the side of playing the story inside.
- Be prompt: If a story is linked to a sensitive event, and it is likely to be stressful on the subjects, be timely with reports. Be understanding of the impact of timing.
- Be complete: If editors identify missing information in a story, readers will, too. An omission can be as damaging as misinformation.
- Be knowledgeable: If an editor can't make sense of a story, most readers likely won't understand it either. Reporters must do their homework when writing about unfamiliar subjects.
- Be sensitive: If a story strikes an editor as being sensational, readers will likely have a similar reaction. Pay attention to how stories are written, right down to word selection.
- Be open to criticism: If readers are upset with newspaper policies, accept the feedback in forthright fashion. Don't squelch criticism. Use the opportunities to explain policies and/or to revisit and revise guidelines.
- Be selective: If you're interviewing individuals unaccustomed to being in the public eye, choose quotes carefully. Stories should capture the flavor of an event, and reporters have no obligation to protect individuals by censoring, cleaning up or toning down what they say. At the same time, newspapers shouldn't go out of their way to put people in a bad or awkward light.

Rights and responsibilities are less defined when tackling issues in the private arena. Readers will be less forgiving if they believe these individuals or organizations have been treated poorly in the press.

Timeliness is one of the most important considerations when reporting public information, and it's doubly important with regard to sensitive circumstances. Delayed publication can unnecessarily aggravate a situation.

However, before newspapers get a shot at being punctual, they must receive the information from appropriate agencies. The process often has built-in delays. Editors and reporters, despite their efforts to work with public



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officials, still might find limited ability to speed up the process.

On the other hand, newspapers do have control over how soon the information gets published once it is received. All newspapers usually can improve turnaround.

Readers often ask why newspapers stand firm on access to and publication of a variety of records. It's much like the proverbial "if you give an inch, they'll take a mile." If the press agrees to one concession, all too often an individual or agency will try to stretch the rules. Soon laws are enacted with additional restrictions on what once was routinely public data – everyday information that's important to readers.

Newspapers must stand solid on the stance that their communities – their readers – are best served by a full menu of public data rather than a selective serving.

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