

Sustaining Credibility in a Context of Conflicts

The Challenge for Journalism

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Television news reporter Mirthala Salinas announced to the Los Angeles Telemundo viewers on June 8, 2007, that Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and his wife of 20 years were separating. She didn't disclose a material fact that she knew: this marriage was dissolving because the mayor had been having an affair. She also didn't disclose that she was the woman with whom he was having the affair. By early July, both the mayor and the reporter had publicly confirmed that they were romantically involved. Salinas was first placed on administrative leave. After a month-long internal investigation by her employer, she received a two-month suspension for violation of the station's conflict-of-interest policies, for both her involvement with the mayor and her failure to disclose the relationship to her employers. Upon returning to work, Salinas was reassigned from Los Angeles to Riverside County, and she resigned.

This is the conventional journalistic conflict-of-interest story. A journalist gets too cozy with her source and is disciplined. But the problem of conflicting desires or loyalties in journalism is more complex than the need for reporters to refrain from having sex with their sources. Far more interesting are the subtle conflicts of interest and conflicts of commitment that individual journalists face but rarely acknowledge. Far more intriguing are the institutional conflicts of interest and conflicts of commitment that are almost never labeled as such. These conflicts can threaten the credibility of journal-

ists and the news organizations for which they work. Journalists have long prized their independence and ability to report the truth fairly and accurately, which is why journalism has developed strong stances on conflicts of interest and conflicts of commitment. However, as in other professions, these stances risk being undermined by changes in structure and funding.

This chapter describes the scope of conflicts that impede, or can be perceived as impeding, journalists in doing their jobs and explains why the mere appearance of a conflict of interest matters to journalists and their news-organization employers. It reviews some individual conflicts and organizational conflicts and explains why those conflicts are of concern to journalism and what is being done to address them. It also considers how the expansion of reporting platforms to include the web and its cadre of citizen-journalists raises new questions for journalism and requires ongoing diligence.

The Job of Journalists

In a web-centric information era, journalists compete for public notice amid a cacophony of messages. For citizens to appropriately process journalistic messages, these must be distinguished from entertainment, public relations, advertising, and input from bloggers and the newly dubbed citizen-journalists. Traditionally, the role of journalist was first that of gatekeeper. There are many events and issues in the world that could be reported. Traditionally, what counted as "news," something worthy of a citizen's time and attention, was those issues and events chosen by editors and reporters. In the twentieth century, if a news organization did not report on an issue or event, it went largely unnoticed. By the start of the twenty-first century, anyone with access to a computer or a cell phone with a camera could, in turn, be a news producer and consumer. Members of the public can access information without relying on journalists to provide it.

The journalist's traditional role as gatekeeper and primary channel of information to citizens has certainly diminished, but, ironically, the social institution of journalism is more important than ever. The special role-related responsibility of journalism now, as before, is to provide citizens with information we need for self-governance. The essential shared value of journalism, which distinguishes that practice from other media and other information-givers, is that of timely truth-telling. In the midst of a virtual world of message-givers, journalists must make efforts to ensure that audience members recognize them as credible information sources that provide the reliable evidence necessary for audience members to be educated decision makers in a democracy. According to media ethics

scholars Sandra Borden and Michael Pritchard (2001, 75), "Journalists, however else they might be characterized, have responsibilities grounded in their protected social function of gathering, interpreting, presenting, and disseminating information needed for individuals and communities to make sound judgments about matters of personal, political, and social importance."

Research shows that working journalists know where their primary loyalty should lie. In a 1999 survey on values by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and the Committee of Concerned Journalists, more than 80 percent of respondents listed "making the reader/listener/viewer your first obligation" as a "core principle of journalism." In separate open-ended, in-depth interviews with developmental psychologists, "more than 70 percent of journalists similarly placed 'audience' as their first loyalty, well above their employers, themselves, their profession, or even their families" (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007, 53).

In contrast, as corporate ownership of news outlets has increased since the late twentieth century, the management of news has become firmly entrenched in a business model that seeks to produce the news "product" at the lowest cost and with maximum profit. The potential interorganizational conflict between making news and making money is ubiquitous. Traditionally, this issue was managed by the maintenance of a strict "wall" between the editorial function of a news organization (news gathering, reporting, and placement) and the business function (advertising and circulation). That wall has now eroded throughout the industry. According to Borden and Pritchard (2001, 88), "The solution of strictly demarcating editorial and business functions has been less effective as corporate linkages have become harder to disentangle and as management trends in journalism have begun to emphasize the integration of organizational functions." For example, Disney acquired the American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), including ABC's news division, in 1996. Two years later, ABC pulled an investigative television news report on pedophiles working at Disney theme parks. While there is no consensus regarding the "real" reasons that the story did not run, the appearance of conflict of interest with the parent company is inescapable.

The Development of Dispassionate Journalism

The idea of the professional journalist who strives to serve the public interest in his or her reporting is a relatively new concept. As late as 1850, journalists moved between serving in political positions and reporting for parti-

san newspapers. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, "an editor generally berated the opposing party and leadership, so using any current measures of standards—such as accuracy or balance—is therefore irrelevant" (Dicken-Garcia 1989, 97). However, two forces were at work that gave rise to the development of the balanced, accurate, complete, and relevant (BARC) accounts that news organizations became known for in the twentieth century.

New presses and printing techniques allowed for cheap printing, which meant that newspapers were suddenly in the budget of all citizens, not just those with political power and agendas. Newspapers moved from filling a "political role" that served the needs of political parties or groups to an "information or news role" that provided "the individual with information useful in life's conduct, decision making, and participation in the political system." The editors who ran these cheap newspapers, dubbed the Penny Press, viewed "their role as fulfilling a duty to provide the news—not to serve a party or mercantile class; to provide a realistic view of contemporary life, despite taboos; to expose abuses wherever they were found; and to report items of human interest" (Dicken-Garcia 1989, 106–7). For the first time, U.S. news media were making enough money on their own and no longer needed to rely on the patronage of political parties.

In addition, the invention of the telegraph in the mid nineteenth century provided the impetus for the creation of the Associated Press, a wire service owned and shared by a cooperative of news organizations. News could be gathered far from the home newspaper and sent quickly through telegraph lines. Rather than each news organization bearing the expense of satellite bureaus and the cost of transmission, a collaborative pool of reporters and, later, photographers and then broadcast journalists could gather a story that was then distributed to all member organizations. This collaborative reporting required, then as now, a product that was suitable for a true "mass" audience, in which the news gatherers could make no assumptions about the political leanings or biases of the audience members. The goal of producing an "objective" news account was based on the idea of providing information that could be filtered through any reader's or viewer's political or personal biases. So, perhaps ironically, while reporting that serves no special interest other than accuracy is touted as an important ethical principle of journalism today, it rests on the technological and marketing values of the past. Through this notion of serving no special interest, the concern about conflicts of interest for journalists was born. By the late twentieth century, writers of media eth-

cs textbooks assumed the importance of journalists' putting their professional obligations first.

Operational Definitions

Both individuals and institutions can have conflicts with external obligations and interests or within internal roles and expectations. Some of these are conflicts of interest; others are conflicts of commitment.

Conflicts of interest "are conflicts between professional interests and personal or financial interests. What distinguishes conflict of interest situations is that the conflict is between what one is trusted or expected to do in one's role . . . and financial or personal influences or interests that will or could compromise one's professional judgment and behavior in that role" (Werhane and Doering 1996, 51). A description of conflicts of interest as a *prima facie* wrong is typical in journalism textbooks: "When a reporter and editor no longer have a primary obligation or loyalty to their audiences but instead to someone else, problems of conflict of interest emerge" (Englehardt and Arney 1999, 181). Another author lists common examples of the kinds of financial interest that will generate conflicts of interest for journalists: *Junkets*: expenses-paid trips that make it attractive for journalists to cover events . . . *Freebies*: gifts like free meals or tickets, to befriend or influence a media professional . . . *Bribes*: outright payments or promises to buy services or goods from a media outlet in return for some favor. For instance, a lawyer can promise to purchase advertising from a TV station if the station's general manager cancels an investigative consumer segment about a product manufactured by the lawyer's client" (Bugeja 2008, 198). The same author describes "nonmonetary conflicts" as follows:

Personal vs. personal value: conflicts that occur when your personal value clashes with a personal value of a relative or other person outside your place of employment . . . Professional vs. professional value: conflicts that occur when one of your professional values directly conflicts with another of your professional values or when one of your professional values conflicts with a value of your co-worker, superior, client, source or employer. Personal vs. professional value: conflicts that occur when one of your personal values directly conflicts with one of your professional values or when one of your personal values conflicts with a professional value of your co-worker, superior, client, source or employer. (200)

Conflicts of commitment "are conflicts that entail a conflict between two or more sets of professional commitments that will affect one's focus of time, attention, and responsibility" (Werhane and Doering 1996, 51). Conflicts of commitment can also occur between personal and professional role commitments and between one's own professional commitment and one's commitment to a higher principle or external obligation.

All individuals and institutions face potentially conflicting situations. However, while conflicts of *interest* can be ethically managed through avoidance, recusal, or disclosure, conflicts of *commitment* may only sometimes be addressed in these ways. No one would wish to divest oneself of the various roles that most competent adults play—life partner, parent, child, friend, citizen, and volunteer—for one's professional role. Indeed, professional roles themselves inherently involve conflicts of commitment. Journalists are appropriately loyal to their professional peers and their employers, in addition to their primary loyalty to citizens. They may have too many stories to produce in too little time; they may need to compromise completeness in pursuit of a timely story. Thoughtful individuals and socially aware organizations live with the conscious awareness of the tension of competing obligations, sometimes deciding minute-by-minute which obligation has current priority.

The practice of journalism may be different from other professions in that nonmonetary conflicts, or conflicts of commitment, may be as troubling as financial conflicts. It is easy for most journalists to recognize the ethical problem inherent in someone offering them a bribe in exchange for killing a story. It is less clear for some reporters that failing to report material at the request of a friend or a loved one is just as much an ethical violation. Conflict-of-interest and conflict-of-commitment rules and expectations are based on the principle that any interest—financial or otherwise—that could deter a journalist from providing citizens with information they need requires attention.

Conflicts of Interest for Individual Journalists

Conflicts of interest for individuals can be obvious, such as a reporter having romantic or sexual interest in a source or a story subject or accepting a bribe to keep particular information out of a news story. These types of conflict could (and do) easily compromise an individual's ability to meet his or her professional obligations. Other common types of conflict of interest include

outside employment, such as invitations to produce freelance work for a source, a potential source, or a competing news organization.

Most news organizations and professional news-gathering organizations provide guidelines recommending that journalists completely avoid at least some individual conflicts of interest. For example, the Society of Professional Journalists (1996) recommends to its members that "journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know." Along with "avoiding conflicts of interest, real or perceived" and disclosing "unavoidable conflicts," members are counseled to "remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility," to "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," and to "deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage."

After its eschewing codes of ethics for years, scandals in the early 2000s led the venerable New York Times to develop and publish a "policy" on ethics in journalism. The policy is based on the assumption that "the company, its separate business units and members of its newsrooms and editorial pages share an interest in avoiding conflicts of interest or any appearance of conflict." It notes that "conflicts of interest, real or apparent, may arise in many areas. They may involve tensions between journalists' professional obligations to our audience and their relationships with news sources, advocacy groups, advertisers, or competitors; with one another or with the company or one of its units. And at a time when two-career families are the norm, the civic and professional activities of spouses, household members and other relatives can create conflicts or the appearance of them." The Times warns those covered by the policy that "any intentional violation of these rules" is a serious offense "that may lead to disciplinary action, potentially including dismissal" (New York Times Company 2005). The fourteen-page document covers a variety of potentially conflicting situations and consistently makes the point that the company will not tolerate any behavior that might interfere with a journalist's neutrality or give the perception of interference, on or off the job.

Journalists who gather and produce images and sound are held to the same standard as their print counterparts. For example, the National Press Photographers Association's Code of Ethics (2006) says: "Do not accept gifts,

favors, or compensation from those who might seek to influence coverage"; and, "Avoid political, civic and business involvements or other employment that compromise or give the appearance of compromising one's own journalistic independence." The Radio-Television News Directors Association and Foundation (2000) counsels its members to "understand that any commitment other than service to the public undermines trust and credibility," and not to "accept gifts, favors, or compensation from those who might seek to influence coverage" or "engage in activities that may compromise their integrity or independence." In addition, in a section labeled "Independence," members are issued the following reminder:

Professional electronic journalists should: Gather and report news without fear or favor, and vigorously resist undue influence from any outside forces, including advertisers, sources, story subjects, powerful individuals, and special interest groups; Resist those who seek to buy or politically influence news content or who would seek to intimidate those who gather and disseminate the news; Determine news content solely through editorial judgment and not as the result of outside influence; Resist any self-interest or peer pressure that might erode journalistic duty and service to the public; Recognize that sponsorship of the news will not be used in any way to determine, restrict, or manipulate content; and Refuse to allow the interests of ownership or management to influence news judgment and content inappropriately.

The need to avoid interests that could interfere with the public interest is, therefore, a professional convention, regardless of the reporting platform.

When it comes to managing conflicts of interest, most news organizations, as is the case with the New York Times, prohibit newsroom employees from buying stock or engaging in financial transactions if there is a possibility that they had inside knowledge due to their journalistic status. Journalists are almost always prohibited from accepting compensation from any potential news source or story subject. Generally, they are not allowed to accept anything of value from anyone other than their employer, unless it is something that is offered to the general public. For example, journalists are generally allowed to accept frequent flyer miles for their personal or business-related trips but are not allowed to accept free flights from corporate sources. Exceptions may be made in military or government coverage, where there is no other way to get the story or no way to pay a travel fee.

Managing conflicts of interest when journalists do work on their own behalf, such as writing books or maintaining websites, is trickier. The material

contained in a news story or production is usually a small portion of the information that the journalist collected. It is not unusual, therefore, for a journalist who has been involved in a long investigation or ongoing news story to be approached by an agent or publisher wishing to turn the journalist's observations and expertise into a book-length manuscript. Few news organizations have worked out, in advance, how to negotiate such interests. The New York Times disallows journalists' using such experience "until the news has played out." The Times also claims ownership to anything that appears in its publications or productions (New York Times Company 2005, 14).

New York Times staffers who host their own personal web pages or blogs are counseled that they cannot completely separate themselves from their professional connection with the Times. They are told that they "must avoid taking stands on divisive public issues." However separate the journalist believes the blog or website to be, the writing "must nevertheless be temperate in tone, reflecting taste, decency and respect for the dignity and privacy of others" (New York Times Company 2005, 13). In a world in which journalists have varied opportunities to contribute to the public discussion, news organizations have an affirmative duty to publish clear guidelines for employees that are also available to audience members.

Developing a sexual, romantic, or otherwise intimate relationship with a source is also considered to be a conflict of interest. While there may not be a financial component, sustaining a relationship that is in one's self-interest may take precedence over following one's news judgment. Similarly, the desire to produce an award-winning story or picture may interfere with news judgment. But, while news organizations can disallow close relationships with sources or require disclosure of relationships with potential newsmakers, it is more difficult to control an individual's drive for reward. But through initial training and appropriate prioritizing of values in the newsroom, journalists learn and are reminded that the goal is to produce great news, with the understanding that great news may be rewarded, rather than simply to produce the kind of stories that they hope will be rewarded. This kind of conflict is often more of an issue for visual journalists. Something that everyone in the newsroom agrees is "a helluva picture" may be published for its aesthetic or sensational value rather than for its newsworthiness.

It is not possible to entirely avoid conflicts of interest, nor does self-interest always conflict with professional interest. Most journalists strive to meet their role-related responsibilities and to do so without causing anyone unjustifiable harm. That is simply the ethical thing to do. However, most also appreciate

the kudos and feeling of satisfaction that come from a job well done. Journalists need to get paid for the work they do. When professional interest and self-interest are complementary, the important individual responsibility is to put the professional interest first. Individual intentions in this regard are simply not accessible to others.

Conflicts of Interest for Institutions

News institutions can also be drawn into serving self-interest rather than the public interest. According to one study, "More than 40% of journalists and news executives surveyed admitted that they had engaged in self-censorship by purposely avoiding newsworthy stories or softening the tone of stories. With media organizations trying to attract more readers and larger audiences, market pressures were most often cited as the reason for such self-censorship . . . More than a third of all respondents said news that might hurt the financial interests of a news organization is sometimes or often ignored. More than one-third said they censored themselves because of personal career concerns" (Croteau and Hoynes 2005, 172).

News organizations have always had to make money. Even not-for-profit news entities could not stay in business without bringing in enough income to pay reporters and otherwise support news production. But the late twentieth century saw a shift from family ownership to corporate ownership and from news organizations owned by an entity that produced only news to ownership by conglomerates with a variety of interests. With corporate and conglomerate values came news managers who were hired precisely because they shared those values. "By the 1980's, the consolidation of media ownership put businesspeople, rather than journalists, in ultimate charge of news divisions" (Croteau and Hoynes 2005, 160).

Market pressures are discussed in the journalism ethics literature but are rarely labeled as the conflicts of interest that they are. For example, a story on the front page of the *New York Times* Arts section of December 4, 2007, says that "morning programs like 'Today' on NBC and 'The View' on ABC are the modern equivalents of the old Barbizon Hotel for Women, a frilly haven where men were not allowed above the first floor—or here, after the first hour—and viewers are treated to diet tips, ambush makeovers, cancer health scares, relationship counseling and, of course, shopping." These shows "have blurred the distinction between consumer news and product promotion." Despite a note that "it used to be that hosts who are part of the network's news division

maintained an air of neutrality during consumer segments; now they are in on the pitch," the blurring is treated as an extension of the status quo: "Product placement is hardly a new phenomenon, and the morning shows long ago mastered the quid pro quo of daily television: Actors give interviews timed to their latest projects; authors are recruited as experts just as their books hit the stores" (Stanley 2007).

The tendency of media observers, along with owners and managers of news organizations, is simply to make note of how economic values are replacing news values. These observations are described but rarely judged in a normative way. To call these organizational conflicts of interest by name would imply that the organizations have an obligation to address the ethical implications of failing to meet their responsibilities to citizens. However, the conflict is clear. "The responsibility of journalism to report fully and fairly on events of the day has the potential to clash with the interests of corporate parents to promote their businesses and minimize any negative news about their operations. In addition, because their business interests are so broad and far-reaching, there are very few economic or legislative initiatives that do not affect some part of a media conglomerate" (Croteau and Hoynes 2005, 177).

In the light of journalism's commitment to timely truth-telling, news agents are ethically required to address interests and situations in which there is even an appearance of a conflict. The credibility of news media rests on citizens' assumptions that their favorite news source is choosing material based on no value deemed higher than the public interest and is presenting information in news contexts that is balanced, accurate, relevant, and complete (the BARC formula of news presentation). "Society is vulnerable to the judgment of journalists . . . we are highly dependent on journalists for furnishing information that enables us to make meaningful decisions about our lives, and we have little choice but to trust that journalists will strive to meet our needs and interests in this regard" (Borden and Pritchard 2001, 75). Anything that challenges this assumption weakens the credibility that separates journalism from other sources of information. But individual journalists are dependent on their news organization to provide the conflict-free latitude for them to do their own best work.

Just as individuals have conflicts of interest, news organizations have a combination of interests in making news and making money. Whether those interests are complementary or competing depends on leadership within the news organization. A classic example of an institutional conflict of interest is

the case of the Los Angeles Times and Staples Center. In October 1999, the Los Angeles Times devoted a complete Sunday magazine issue to coverage of the newly opened Staples Center Arena. The journalists who worked on the issue did not know that news and business managers had secretly entered into an agreement with Staples Center owners to split the advertising profits from the magazine. Readers and reporters were appalled when this came to light, and top managers lost their jobs. But this was no accidental slip-up or surprising error in judgment. Instead, it was the culmination of the two-year reign of publisher Mark Willes, who "announced that he was dismantling the wall between the paper's business and editorial departments, saying he'd blow it up with a 'bazooka' if necessary. Willes contended that the two could work together to help the paper, without allowing advertisers to influence news decisions" (Croteau and Hoynes 2005, 164).

As egregious as it was for the Los Angeles Times to be so closely entwined with a potential news source, some forms of "ad-formation" are commonplace. For example, most newspapers have "special" sections. According to Croteau and Hoynes (2006, 168), "At the Oregonian, the advertiser-friendly home and auto sections are simply written by the ad department. The Denver Post turns over the production of its skiing, gardening, casino gambling, and other sections to its advertising department." In the absence of convention, rule, or disclosure, few readers know whether the food section is sponsored by advertisers or is produced by reporters in the newsroom. It is not unusual for local weather pieces on local news programs to have local sponsors. No one outside the newsroom knows whether the piece on the local hospital's latest diagnostic tool was really produced as news or the television station is running a video news release produced by the hospital's public relations department in the hope of generating business for the new and expensive machine. The lack of transparency by news organizations in this regard can create a suspicion of a conflict of interest. Audience members simply do not know whether the institution is putting their or the sponsor's interests first. As even the appearance of a conflict erodes journalistic credibility, news organizations have an obligation to separate advertising and sponsorship from all news production. It is ethically required that they explicitly tell audience members when advertising interests and news production are combined.

Conflicts of interest can develop simply because it is cheaper for news organizations to accept what they are given by sources in the form of press releases, video news releases, and photo opportunities, rather than to have journalists conduct independent and time-consuming investigations. Ac-

ording to Croteau and Haynes (2005, 163), "Commercial news organizations would like to produce credible news coverage at the lowest possible cost. This leads to practices in which journalists rely on outside sources to feed them stories. Routine news material from government and the private sector efficiently helps news organizations fill their broadcasts and newspapers." As the least powerful elements of the community have the least access to marketing techniques and knowledge, they are the least likely to be represented in the pursuit of cheap news production. When news organizations ignore the need of the powerless to have a voice, the whole community suffers. Citizens do not get all the information they need to have for self-governance when the voice of the least powerful is ignored.

Another development that creates potential conflicts is that of "transaction journalism," in which journalistic accounts are tied to the promotion of products. "For example, next to its book reviews, the online edition of the *New York Times* . . . carries a direct link to an online bookseller, in this case *barnesandnoble.com* . . . The *New York Times* gets a percentage of the book's sale price for having brought the consumer to the *barnesandnoble.com* site. Because a negative review is unlikely to generate sales, the newspaper now has a financial interest in promoting—rather than just reviewing—a book" (Croteau and Hoynes 2005, 169).

And, while the combining of journalism with advertising interests might be an obvious trap for institutions to avoid, there is also the more subtle trend toward making news more entertaining to boost numbers of readers or viewers and therefore increase sales. "Sex, violence, spectacle: these sorts of programs are the logical end products of the corporate pursuit of profits. They are relatively cheap to produce and, like an accident on the highway, they predictably draw a regular audience. What these programs lack, however, is any sense of serving a larger public interest by providing substantive content" (Croteau and Hoynes 2005, 157). In the conventional vernacular of local television news, "If it bleeds, it leads." The most visually dramatic story is far more likely to be the featured news package at the top of a program than the story that is more relevant to self-governance and, predictably, less dramatic.

Advertising, entertainment values, and news all come together when the focus of news managers is pleasing the audience or serving up what audience members say they want, rather than providing what is most in the public interest. "The result can be feel-good, watered-down sensationalized news that may attract readers and audiences, but that leaves citizens with little of substance. Citizens wind up with 'news' that serves commercial interests rather

than the public interest. Managers are rewarded for increased profitability while journalists are left wondering what has happened to their 'profession'" (Croteau and Hoynes 2005, 164).

Institutions have a responsibility to refrain from conflicts of interest or the appearance of conflicts of interest. When it is not possible to refrain—such as the need for a news organization to make a profit in addition to fulfilling its ethical responsibility—for the sake of credibility, the news organization needs to be transparent with its audience about how it is handling the conflict. It is not enough to note the drift in the industry from news values to commercial values. Just as for-profit hospitals have a responsibility to provide high-quality patient care despite the interests of the stockholders, so do news organizations have a responsibility to provide information that citizens need for self-governance, regardless of economic interest.

Conflicts of Commitment for Individuals and Institutions

Even the most self-aware individuals and institutions will have conflicts of commitment. Individual journalists' conflicts of commitment most often arise in the social activism arena. It is natural that journalists should be passionate about political issues and social justice. *Caring* about the news is certainly an essential element to gathering and reporting the news. However, many news organizations and individual journalists have a hard time determining where to draw the line in civic participation. Marching in a pro-choice or pro-life rally is generally not allowed; contributing to a cause, particularly if the contribution is anonymous, often is allowed. Having campaign signs in one's front yard is generally not allowed; voting is permitted.

The closer one's personal connection to a newsworthy matter, the more difficult it becomes to justify covering the story. For example, a city hall reporter and a photographer for the San Francisco Chronicle were taken off coverage of "marriage for gays and lesbians, because they were among the thousands of same-sex couples who received marriage licenses through the city." The determination was made on the basis "that *Chronicle* journalists directly and personally involved in a major news story—one in whose outcome they also have a personal stake—should not also cover that story" (McBride 2008, 1–2).

Personal involvement in a story damages the journalist's ability to be unbiased or to be perceived by the audience as unbiased. But so does public political and civic involvement. The question is not *whether* journalists are allowed to participate in matters of social importance. It is, rather, whether

journalists should be allowed *additional* participation in matters of social importance. Journalists are active in the community by nature of doing their jobs. Additional participation gives them additional power above that which they already enjoy; and as the power of the personal rides on the coattails of the news organization, it is impossible to effectively separate the two.

Journalists should give up the opportunity for additional political and civic involvement for the sake of their own and their news organization's credibility. Journalists are not the only professionals who need to restrict their off-hours' activities because of how those activities might reflect on their employers or on public perception of their work. Imagine a judge demonstrating against the death penalty, or an employee of the Environmental Protection Agency arguing against clean air and water standards.

Institutional conflicts of commitment arise when the role of the news organization as good corporate citizen is considered. News organizations, for example, are often involved in local philanthropy, from having their own "People in Need" or "Send a Kid to Camp" funds and accompanying stories to involvement in the local United Way campaign. While it is not wrong for corporations to support their local communities, news organizations that do so can run the risk of interfering with their journalists' ability to conduct independent reporting. Nothing in the community should be above scrutiny. Nonprofit status, or approval as a United Way agency, does not imply that a charity is "good." Social service agencies can fail to meet the needs of their clients. Philanthropic organizations can be the site of scandal and misuse of funds. But careful journalistic scrutiny of a cultural or philanthropic or social service organization is less likely to happen if the news organization's owner, publisher, or station manager serves on its board.

Most troublesome in this regard is the role that United Way plays in most newsrooms. "Of all the charities and non-profits that exist within a community, only United Way gets the benefit of widespread payroll deductions. Few fund drives involve reporters receiving pledge cards with their paychecks. Even fewer can boast of newsroom 'volunteers' who follow up with colleagues, checking to ensure that everyone has 'had the opportunity to give'" (Elliott 1991). United Way implicitly gets managerial approval that results in newspapers and programs that keep track of the success of the fund-raising drives, with plenty of stories to encourage citizens to give. United Way, and the agencies under its wing, receives little journalistic scrutiny. Just as it is reasonable to expect journalists to refrain from involvement in political and civic activity that would call the credibility of the news organization into

question, I believe it is reasonable to expect news organizations, and their managers, to refrain from involvement with outside organizations that then come to be viewed in the newsroom as exempt from scrutiny.

Attachment to government can also be a problem. It is conventionally understood that journalism serves as the "watchdog" on government. Part of what citizens need to know for self-governance is what government is doing in our name and any controversies regarding those actions. Participating in the military's "embedded journalism" program may be the only way to cover war in real time. But when news anchors wear American-flag lapel pins and newspapers print full-color, full-page flags to display in one's window, news organizations are failing to meet the public interest. In a time of national crisis, citizens need news organizations that critically report our government's actions and how they are being perceived in a global context. Citizens do not need journalism that simply repeats government officials' perspectives or that panders to the latest public opinion poll.

Equally troublesome, but conventionally accepted, is the role of news organizations in endorsing candidates or voter initiatives or weighing in on controversial civic matters through editorials. Along with offering a public forum for citizens' and external commentators' opinions, news organizations present their own well-reasoned arguments in favor of or against a variety of public issues. While most news organizations erect a "wall" between those who write for the news side and those who write editorials, the separation is not apparent to audience members. It is not unreasonable for audience members to wonder about the ability of a journalist to remain unbiased when, seemingly, the news organization as a whole is throwing its weight on one side or another of a campaign or controversy.

Conclusion

Traditionally, news organizations have dealt swiftly with individual reporters who violated conflict-of-interest policies. Reporters were either fired or reassigned to eliminate even the appearance that journalists might have covered stories with which they had a strong connection. Elimination of journalistic bias has traditionally been viewed as essential to the news organization's maintaining its credibility.

As strict as news organizations have generally been, however, in dealing with individual reporters' conflicts of interest, the organizations have been equally lax regarding potential conflicts at the executive or organizational

level. This expression of selective attention has created a perception of mixed messages, at best, and an unwillingness to address the systematic conflicts of interest.

As with other professions and societal practices, news organizations are fraught with potentially conflicting situations. Many people, passions, and principles can pull at individuals and institutions that are working to serve the public interest. The advantage that news organizations have, but rarely use, is the ability to communicate directly and easily with those they serve. Disclosure of competing interests ought to come early and often, along with management's explanation of how potential conflicts, particularly at the institutional level, are being handled.

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