



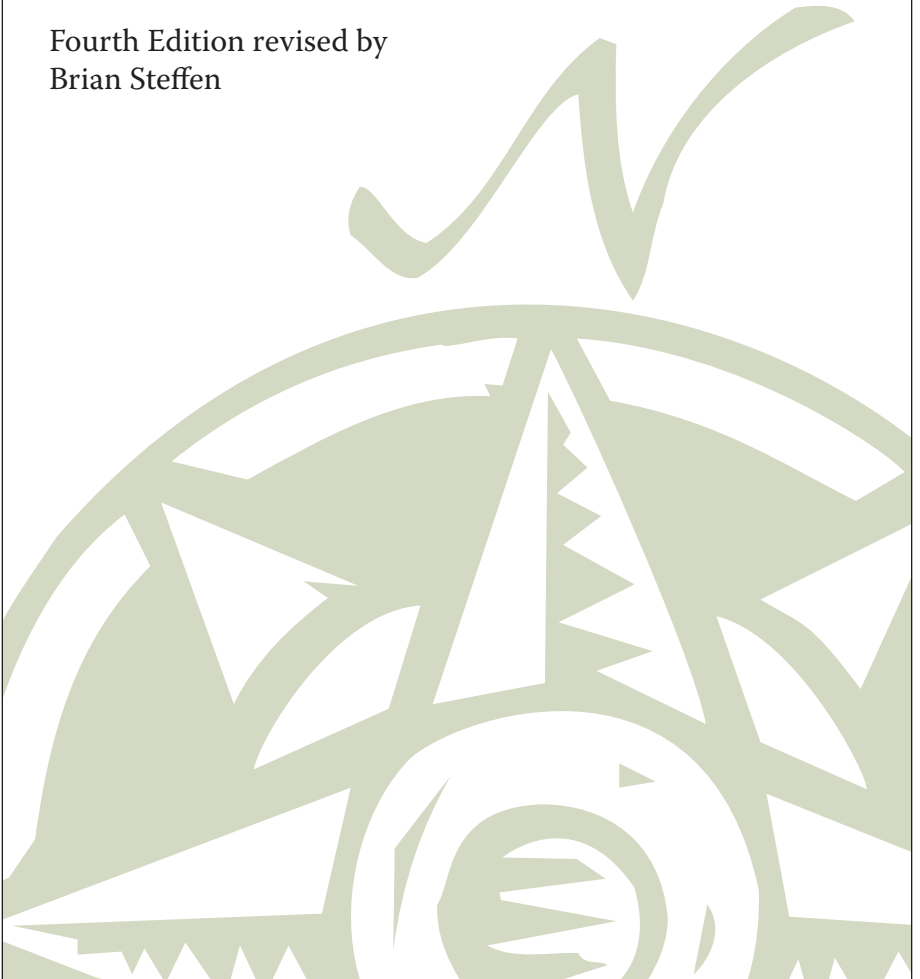
ASSOCIATED  
COLLEGIATE  
PRESS

# Model Code of Ethics

FOR COLLEGIATE  
JOURNALISTS

by Albert DeLuca  
and Tom Rolnicki

Fourth Edition revised by  
Brian Steffen



# OVERVIEW

To seek truth and to publish it is the two-step goal of a journalist. Though plainly stated, this process is not always simple or easy to achieve. To help journalists be true to this goal, print and online newspapers, magazines and yearbooks adopt rules and guidelines, which often include a code of ethics for their members to follow. 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. Once a code is adopted, it brings desirable uniformity to some degree to the news gathering process and in the group's search for truth. The code answers questions and reminds those who operate under it that standards of honesty and performance exist. A code of ethics is not a burden; rather, a code is a useful license to practice news gathering and publishing free of much uncertainty. The code can be used by individuals to measure their work. The code can also be used to evaluate the integrity of the publication as a whole. Readers should expect nothing less than the truth in all print and online news publications. Adoption of a code of ethics by those who publish news helps safeguard the public trust given to journalists.

ACP's model ethics code may be adopted without changes, but it is more likely that a staff may want to modify the code to fit any unique characteristics of the campus and the publication. Ideally, this model will be suitable for print and online newspapers, yearbooks and magazines published by students. However, some of the points may be more appropriate for one type of publication than another. Finally, the realities of budgets and staffing may make some points impractical or impossible to follow completely. If the complete model is unattainable, a staff will want to adopt those points that are important and attainable regardless of limitations caused by budgets and other factors.

A college student media staff should view a code of ethics as an evolving reference document. All staff members should have a copy; it should be discussed at a staff meeting at the start of a publishing term; all staff recruits, including volunteers and those who are paid, should be introduced to the code as a part of their orientation. It should be revised as needs change and it should be compared to other codes for completeness. Collegiate journalists who follow a code of ethics will find the transition to commercial or non-student media easier.

College and university media that adopt this code to their traditions and existing practices should take care to make certain that no staff member unilaterally imposes a standard of ethical conduct on the remainder of the staff. As ethics is more a process of decision making rather than a result, the ethical standards of a student media organization should be the product of discussion and debate among student journalists, guided by the standards that inform the practices of professional journalists in the United States.

Adoption of and adherence to a journalism code of ethics will lead to greater credibility for the news media.

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# CODE OF ETHICS

## 01 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 publication 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.

## 02 GIFTS

Gifts should not be accepted. Any gift should be returned to the sender or sent to a charity. If the gift is of *de minimis* (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.

## 03 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 legiti-

mate 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.

## 04 OWNERSHIP OF BOOKS, RECORDS, OTHER PRODUCTS GIVEN FOR REVIEW

Any materials given to the publication for review become the property of the publication and not of any individual staff member. The editor reserves the right to disperse the property in an equitable way.

## 05 OTHER EMPLOYMENT

Other employment should not conflict with the staffer's first responsibilities to the publication. The staffer must report any other employment to the editor to avoid any conflicts of interest with assignments or other staff editorial or business responsibilities or influences.

## 06 OTHER CAMPUS MEDIA WORK

To avoid a conflict of interest, a staffer should not hold similar positions on two or more campus news, public information or public relations media or organizations.

## 07 ONLINE MEDIA WORK

Student journalists working with established student media may consider starting their own blog or digital-media sites to serve their campus communities. But care should be taken to keep in mind the potential consequences of their decision on the student newspaper, yearbook or other medium. Editors and managers should draft and enforce policies governing the work of student journalists in the online environment as that work impacts the ability of the student press to serve its mission in the campus community.

## 08 OTHER OFF-CAMPUS OR FREE LANCE MEDIA WORK

Approval of work for an off-campus news medium and free lance media work should be sought in advance of the commitment. It is permissible only in a non-competitive medium, on a staffer's own time and should not conflict with the staffer's obligations to the publication.

## 09 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. To maintain the role of the press as an independent watchdog of government, a staffer should not be an elected or appointed member of student government.

## 10 OUTSIDE ACTIVITIES, INCLUDING POLITICAL

Political involvement, holding off-campus public office and service in

community organizations should be considered carefully to avoid compromising professional integrity and that of the publication. The notion of the journalist as an independent observer and fact-finder is important to preserve. A staffer involved in specific political action, especially in a leadership role, should not be assigned to cover that involvement.

## 11 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 financial, adversarial, romantic, sexual or closely personal relationships. Intra-staff dating is not recommended if one person assigns or evaluates the work of the other person or if one is in a position to promote the other to a higher staff position.

## 12 USE OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES WHILE ON ASSIGNMENT

Even though a staffer may be able to drink legally, no or only light drinking in a social setting such as a dinner or reception is recommended to avoid any suspicion by a source or the public that the staffer's judgment, credibility or objectivity is impaired by alcohol. When covering an event where alcohol is served, staffers should not accept free drinks unless all drinks are free to everyone in attendance. Staffers should avoid the appearance that they are being "wined and dined" by any source or group.

## 13 SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment is: (verbal) suggestive comments, sexual innuendo, threats, insults, jokes about sex-specific traits, sexual propositions; (nonverbal) vulgar gestures, whistling, leering, suggestive or insulting noises; (physical) touching, pinching, brushing the body, coercing sexual intercourse, assault. This conduct can be called job-related harassment when submission is made implicitly or explicitly a condition of employment, a condition of work-related assignments, compensation and other factors, or if such conduct interferes with the staffer's performance or creates a hostile, intimidating or offensive work environment. Sexual harassment is prohibited. A staff should establish a procedure to report any harassment claim. That procedure should include at least two alternate methods of reporting, information on how the claim will be investigated, and what will be done to correct the situation if it is real harassment. A staff meeting that includes a discussion of sexual harassment and working conditions is recommended at the start of each publishing term.

## 14 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 or close summarization of the work of another source without giving the source proper credit. 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. Mate-

rial that is published on the Internet should be treated in the same way as if it were published in more traditional broadcast media. Because plagiarism can significantly undermine the public trust of journalists and journalism, editors should be prepared to consider severe penalties for documented cases of plagiarism, including dismissal from the staff.

## 15 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.

## 16 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.

## 17 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.

## 18 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? How would I react if my photograph was taken at such a moment of tragedy and anguish?

## 19 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; however, some news media have asked victims of sexual assault to identify themselves for publication. This may be negotiated between the victim and the publication. 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.

## 20 COOPERATION WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT, GOVERNMENT, COLLEGE ADMINISTRATION

To be an effective watchdog on other agencies, a publication must remain independent. The publication should not take over any of the duties of any outside agency; cooperation or involvement in the work of these agencies should be restricted to what is required by law. Staffers should know any freedom of information, open meetings and shield laws that apply to their work. If a staffer thinks any public authority is interfering with the staffer's functions as a journalist, the incident should be reported to the editor. The editor should then seek advice from groups such as the Student Press Law Center, American Civil Liberties Union or an editor or media attorney for a nearby, non-student publication.

## 21 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 the completeness of a story and reflect in a significant way upon the person's public life.

## 22 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. Profane and vulgar words are not acceptable for opinion writing—columns, editorials and other commentary. 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.

## 23 SEXIST LANGUAGE

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

## 24 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.

## 25 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, deaf (or partially deaf). Please consult the style manual of the



Associated Press or another news organization for guidance in properly and accurately identifying individuals on the basis of their membership in ethnic or religious groups or on the basis of their sexual orientation.

## 26 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.

## 27 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 the 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.

## 28 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 of 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. (See 26: 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.

## 29 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.

### 30 SOURCES ON THE INTERNET

Reporters who use the Internet and e-mail to interview sources should identify themselves as a reporter immediately, and should verify the source's identity with a follow-up telephone call. 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. Raising particular concern among journalists is information from so-called "user-generated" sites such as Wikipedia, YouTube, blogs, Facebook and others. While not necessarily inaccurate, such sites allow users to post information and allegations without the benefit of editing or fact-checking.

### 31 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. Such a location could be on the editorial or op-ed page of a newspaper. It should be clearly and prominently labeled as a correction. A magazine or yearbook published semi- or annually may want to publish a correction in the student newspaper, which is published more frequently. 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. Even in the age of the Internet, journalism is still regarded as the 'the first rough draft

of history.' As such, journalists should always keep in mind the impacts their factual errors may have on the future record of a person or event. Editors should judge what policies they should develop to govern requests to modify or even delete information from their Web sites, which can continue to haunt journalists and their sources for years after publication.

### 32 OWNERSHIP OF WORK

Regardless of whether a staffer is paid or a volunteer, the publication "owns" the published and unpublished work done by staffers if the work was done as a staff assignment. Ownership of unpublished work may revert to the staffer at a certain time if the editor agrees with this arrangement. The publication has unlimited use of the work. The act of voluntarily joining a staff indicates approval of this policy. To clarify work-ownership issues, editors should have staff members sign an ownership agreement regarding their work. A model agreement created by the Student Press Law Center is available on the Web at [nspa.studentpress.org/pdf/wheel\\_medialicense.pdf](http://nspa.studentpress.org/pdf/wheel_medialicense.pdf). As is practiced in professional media, readers of the student press should be made aware that ownership of reader submissions is taken by the student press at the time of submission. The publication may wish to develop a document transferring ownership to be signed by readers who submit materials for consideration.

### 33 CONTESTS, HONORS

The publication has a proprietary interest in the material it publishes. Thus, the publication as a voting group or top editors are entitled to determine which entries will represent it in contests. This will avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest that might occur if staffers were to win or accept awards from organizations they are assigned to

cover. Awards presented to the staff as a whole or to the publication generally become the property of the publication. Individuals who win awards for work published in the staff publication may accept the award and retain ownership of it.

### 34 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 is outside the editorial or op-ed pages and mixed with fact-based reporting.

### 35 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.

### 36 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, Web site, phone, fax and in-person visits. The publication should hold periodic open forums or open houses for readers. Reader opinions and suggestions on a range of issues can be solicited at

these forums and can form the basis for future reporting or commentary.

## 37 REPORTER'S CHECKLIST

Through all steps in the reporting process, from conceptualizing the story assignment, through information gathering and pre-writing, to writing, editing and final publication, a reporter must answer these questions:

1. Why am I reporting the story?
2. Is the story fair?
3. Have I attempted to report all angles?
4. Who will the story affect?
5. Can I defend my decision to report the story?

Often, a reporter consults with an editor regarding these questions, especially if the answers are troublesome.

## 38 SUPPLEMENTARY READING

The Elements of Journalism, revised edition, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, 2007, Three Rivers Press.

Media Ethics: Issues and Cases, Sixth Edition, Phillip Patterson and Lee Wilkins, 2007, McGraw-Hill.

Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning, Eighth Edition, Clifford G. Christians et al, 2008, Allyn & Bacon.

Media Ethics: A Philosophical Approach, Matthew Kieran, 1997, Praeger Publishers.

Speech, Media and Ethics: The Limits of Free Expression, Michael Cohen-Almagor, 2005, Palgrave Macmillan.

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Media Ethics and Social Change, Valerie Alia, 2004, Routledge.

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Media and Ethics: Principles for Moral Decisions, Elaine E. Englehardt and Ralph Barney, 2001, Wadsworth.

Issues in Journalism: A Discussion Guide for News Media Ethics, Maclyn McClary, 2005, BookSurge Publishing.

Online Journalism Ethics: Traditions and Transations, Cecilia Friend and Jane B. Singer, 2007, M.E. Sharpe.

Journalism and Truth: Strange Bedfellows, Tom Goldstein and Howard Baker, 2007, Northwestern University Press,

American Carnival: Journalism Under Siege in an Age of New Media, Neil Henry, 2007, University of California Press.

We're All Journalists Now: The Transformation of the Press and Reshaping of the Law in the Internet Age, Scott Gant, 2007, Free Press.

Media Ethics: An Introduction and Overview, H. Ronning and F.P. Kasma, 2004, Juta Academic.

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