

August 4, 2006

Mr. Gary Hill

Ethics Committee Chairman

Society of Professional Journalists

7366 Mariner Drive

Maple Grove, MN 55311

Dear Mr. Hill,

As every journalist knows, there are at least two sides to every story. The recent events at the Santa Barbara News-Press are no exception. So far, the majority of coverage has only reported the claims and comments of those employees who resigned. We believe that most of their comments are a smoke screen to hide their personal agendas. In order to clarify the situation, we would like you to consider the following facts before deciding to award them for their actions.

Facts:

- Five years ago when I purchased the News-Press from the New York Times, everyone cheered that they were finally getting a hands-on owner involved in the community. Now, the people who quit seem to be upset that I am hands-on.
- No one has been fired. All those who left resigned of their own free will.
- The paper sent out only four cease and desist letters. One letter went to each of three former employees and the other was sent to the Santa Barbara Independent. The letter to the employees was based on the company's confidentiality policy, something almost all organizations have in place. That policy clearly states that proprietary and confidential information concerning the internal operations of the paper and internal matters may not be disclosed to our competitors or publicly, even after resigning. All employees have signed this policy and have respected it to our knowledge, with the exception of those who quit. In the case of the Independent, there was no question that they published material that belonged to the News-Press without permission in direct violation of copyright law. When we raised this, their attorneys quickly agreed to remove all News-Press copyrighted material.

- Certain members of the newsroom staff have asked to be represented in a collective bargaining agreement by the Teamsters. While the paper does not believe that this is in the best interests of paper, employees, or the community, we respect their right to do so. We are now moving strictly along those guidelines set down by the NLRB.
- Our staff members understand they are free to publicly discuss unionization issues. There was no attempt to gag or otherwise hinder free speech. The paper would not permit such a thing.

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- One of the main charges by former editor Jerry Roberts is that the "wall between editorial and news had been breached." Nothing could be further from the truth. Mr. Roberts himself served for over a year as both publisher and editor of the paper before being demoted. It appears that this wall is a wall of convenience to Mr. Roberts.
- Travis Armstrong served for just one month as temporary acting publisher during the absence of the co-publishers. During that time, he suspended his activities related to the editorial pages. He also dealt directly with the assistant managing editor on newsroom issues since the Editor's position was left vacant due to Mr. Roberts' resignation. Mr. Armstrong has returned to his regular duties as editor of the editorial pages.
- There are a number of ongoing investigations into improprieties by some of the newsroom staff who resigned. Legal actions have been filed against two former employees regarding those improprieties. We can refer you to those public documents and encourage you to look into this further.
- In every newsroom in this country the relationships between owner/publisher/editor/editorial/news are complex and dynamic. They are based on human emotions, personalities, policies and politics. Even the SPJ Code takes these dynamics into account in that the Code is a guide, rather than a mandate.
- One of the great dangers that any journalist faces is taking something out of context. We believe that the alleged ethical violations the paper has been accused of are inaccurate and out of context. Looked at in context and full detail, they are insignificant and no different than issues raised every day in newsrooms everywhere.

The only five complaints resigned employees can cite are:

1. Describing hair color is to be gender specific, not unisex. This is nothing unusual.

2. Writers must use Mrs. and Miss instead of using Ms. as a default for all females, unless the person requests it.
3. A reporter and three editors were reprimanded for allowing Rob Lowe's address to appear in print, thereby potentially putting his family in danger. (Something that is not allowed in most newsrooms).
4. A follow-up story to an already published story about editorial page editor Travis Armstrong regarding the sentencing for his DUI was killed. The story had already been given more importance than it warranted. A second story would have been overkill.
5. Mr. Armstrong was appointed acting publisher for 30 days.

These hardly constitute an "assault" on the ethics of journalism. If journalists resigned over these issues, there wouldn't be a journalist left working anywhere. There is more to this than has been reported, and leads one to wonder what personality or other issues are involved. We would urge you to carefully look at all the facts.

It is our belief that the SPJ is being used by this group to further their own personal and political agendas, and not as an expression of ethical principals.

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Finally, we note that you state your organization is researching the events at the News-Press. To date, no one from SPJ has contacted anyone connected with the paper except for your letter asking for my reaction and rationale. To what? As journalists, isn't it incumbent upon you to investigate and report both sides? We would be glad to make ourselves available to you to discuss this in detail via phone or in person. Should you require any further documentation, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Wendy McCaw

Co-publisher

Santa Barbara News-Press

