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Interview with Stephen Curran

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Stephen Curran

INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN CURRAN

Malia Spencer

Justice Douglas described an Americans' perceived right to privacy in the 1965 decision *Griswold v. Connecticut*. There is no explicit right to privacy given to citizens in the Constitution but it is implied when looking at the entire Bill of Rights. So how then does the media regulate the balance between its job as societal watchdog and an individual's privacy concerns?

The media's continued coverage of Jenna and Barbara Bush's underage drinking, Monica Lewinski, and once beloved Congressman Gary Condit's relationship with an intern have all tainted the public's views of the media. Privacy and media ethics have become a hot topic once again. Every day decisions are made in a newsroom that greatly affect the lives of both readers and sources. Even the *Mustang Daily* at Cal Poly is faced with these tough decisions. Do the editors decide to run a story about a student who is arrested for theft? Or do they let the drama play out in court without telling the campus community that this type of crime is occurring and being perpetrated by fellow students. When these issues come up, the final word is given to Editor-in-chief Stephen Curran.

As a journalist and editor, Curran's views about privacy continue to evolve. He has been working in the journalism industry for years writing for the *Tribune*, *Mustang Daily* and more recently an internship at the *Las Vegas Sun*. Curran said that editors and writers need to work closely together when confronted with questionable subject matter. "It's difficult to have one rule that applies to every situation generally," Curran said, "it has to be something that the reporters and the editors decide is something the public needs to know."

The editors of a newspaper are seen as the gatekeepers of knowledge. They decide what stories will be written, if they will run, and when they will be published. The power to filter what the public sees carries with it much responsibility. In order to prepare for this aspect of his job, Curran said he has "sought advice from experienced professionals" whose insight he respects. With help from others he is confident in his news judgment abilities.

When deciding what issues to cover in the *Mustang Daily*, Curran said he tries to examine the stories in their greater context. *Mustang Daily*, this year, has not shied away from any issues. There has been coverage of multiple student deaths, lawsuits against the school and campus fraternities, and the addition of a semi-controversial weekly sex columnist. Finding and running stories that will have the biggest impact on readers is paramount, he said. The types of questions asked in these stories are no different than in the coverage of any other article. Reporters are not given any explicit instructions to avoid certain topics. *Mustang Daily* currently does not have a privacy policy but the paper's top editors do sometimes take into consideration privacy issues when planning how a story will run.

“When deciding which stories to run we look for as many facts as possible to back up any claim. Often what sounds like the most promising story, we can't run because we don't have the facts to back it up,” Curran said. “There hasn't been one big story that has resulted in campus backlash, but there have been several smaller decisions made along the way.”

Many times, in broadcast news packages or in print stories, unnamed sources close to an investigation or an organization will be quoted leaving the public to question the credibility of the entire piece. *Mustang Daily's* official policy, like most newspapers, is to only use sources that will go on the record. That doesn't mean there aren't any rare instances in which unnamed sources are appropriate, such as when a source possesses information of great public importance but publicizing it could endanger their safety, Curran said. Even in such a case the top editors of the *Daily* will be informed of the source's true identity. He added, “so far this year we haven't needed them (anonymous sources) very often.”

Building and keeping credibility are two important aspects of the news industry. Once a news outlet loses credibility with its audience, that breach of trust is difficult to repair. It is for that reason that use of anonymous sources and other questionable actions are normally avoided. Privacy issues are dealt with depending on the nature of the story without any blanket policies. “*Mustang Daily* editors,” Curran said, “know how to weigh the factors involved in a news story. It does the journalist no good to burn his or her sources. And going out of your way to invade someone's privacy will ultimately do that. A good journalist knows the difference between cultivating sources and alienating them.” 