

Codes of Conduct in Student Media:
An Analysis of Student Perceptions of Ethics Codes

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Torstein Anders-Magnus Rehn

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Abstract

The following is a study into students' perceptions of codes of conduct in student media organizations. Codes of conduct in a media setting have long been a focus of research, but little research has been done into their application in a student media environment. Student media organizations operate in a unique setting where they are entirely staffed by novice reporters. These organizations double as training grounds for students and as legitimate news sources. This study seeks to analyze this phenomenon by interviewing student media members. The goal of this study is to understand what current students seek in a code of conduct and what they believe a code of conduct to be. Student journalists from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo's Mustang Media Group were asked questions pertaining to codes of conduct. Their responses were then analyzed to better understand what current student journalists beliefs pertaining to codes of conduct were. This study concludes by making recommendations for how a student media code of conduct should be applied. This study helps explain the hazards potential conduct codes have in a student media setting, and what student journalists view as ethical.

Chapter 1.....	2
Introduction.....	2
Statement of the problem.....	2
Background of the problem.....	3
Purpose of ethics & conduct codes.....	3
Definition of key terms.....	4
Research Questions.....	5
Organization of study.....	5
Chapter 2.....	6
Literature review.....	6
Codes of conduct.....	6
Journalism codes of conduct.....	6
Student media ethics.....	7
Chapter 3.....	8
Methodology.....	8
Data Sources.....	8
Participants.....	8
Interview Design.....	9
Data Collection.....	9
Data Presentation.....	10

Delimitations.....	10
Chapter 4.....	11
Findings.....	11
Question 1: What do you look for in a code of conduct?.....	11
Question 2: What should the consequence of violating a code of conduct be?.....	13
Question 3: Are there specific ethical issues a code of conduct should cover?.....	14
Question 4: Are there any further comments you have regarding a possible code of conduct?.....	16
Chapter 5.....	17
Discussions and Recommendations.....	17
Summary.....	17
Discussion.....	18
Question 1: What do you look for in a code of conduct?.....	18
Question 2: What should the consequence of violating a code of conduct be?.....	18
Question 3: Are there specific ethical issues a code of conduct should cover?.....	19
Question 4: Are there any further comments you have regarding a possible code of conduct?.....	19
Recommendations for Practice.....	20
Study Conclusion.....	21
References.....	23

Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the problem

The public nature of journalism and media means that journalists undergo intense scrutiny over the ethics of their profession. Media organizations have been the targets of accusations of untruthfulness, bias and general ethical violations for as long as they have been present in the United States. The public's trust in a media organization is fundamental to that organization's success. As Journalism is supposed to be grounded in truth, ethics are of the utmost importance. This public pressure for media organizations to act honestly creates demand for an ethical code of conduct that these organizations can follow. Mustang Media Group strives to not only replicate a professional media organization, but to be a reputable news source in the San Luis Obispo area. The mission statement reads: "Mustang Media Group will be Cal Poly's ultimate source for local news, a national leader in college media, and will drive conversation through student voices." Despite striving to be a national leader in college media, Mustang Media Group has failed to implement a code of conduct. Any ethical violations or complaints are dealt with on a case by case basis and not based on any published code.

Background of the problem

Journalism in America dates back to before the founding of the United States. Calls for clear codes of ethics have been consistent, but major journalist organizations began to have more formal ethics codes in the 20th century. Two of the most relied on ethics codes, the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, and the International Federation of Journalists' Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists, were first published in the 20th century. College media has had

ethics codes for an equal amount of time, as the Society of Professional Journalists introduced their first one when they were a college fraternity at DePauw University. As it relates to Mustang Media Group, despite being founded in 1906 (as the Polytechnic Journal), it has never had a formal code of ethics. Other college media organizations, such as the Daily Bruin out of UCLA, have published ethics statements.

Purpose of ethics & conduct codes

The intention behind ethics and conduct codes is twofold. First, it is to signify to the public that a media organization is holding itself accountable. Second, it is to provide a framework that reporters can follow as a means of better carrying out their responsibilities. With publicly accessible codes, a media organization is making a declaration of accountability. As transparency in journalism continues becoming a bigger concern to media consumers, a conduct code is fundamental to building trust. The other purpose of these codes is to guide reporters on what best practices are. New journalists, especially student journalists, need a resource for ethical concerns. There is no ethics training requirement for joining MMG. Reporters are expected to learn what is right through trial and error as opposed to training. While the learn by doing principle is considered fundamental to a polytechnic education, the public nature of journalism, partnered with the serious ethical ramifications of errors, makes this an inopportune setting for mistakes. Student media exists both as a training ground for journalists and also as a legitimate media organization. This means that ethical guidelines are necessary for a student media organization.

Definition of key terms

This paper covers both codes of conduct and codes of ethics. There are different interpretations of these terms and their application. Some view codes of ethics as documents listing core principles that an organization subscribes to and codes of conduct as detailed documents with specific rules as to how an individual can act while on and off the job. Others, like Laas et al,(2022) argue that a code of ethics and a code of conduct are the same, and that any code of ethics should be as detailed as necessary to “do what it is supposed to do.”(p. 2)

Laas et al define a code of ethics as “an authoritative formulation of the (morally permissible) standards governing the conduct of members of a group, just because they are members of that group.”(p. 2)

This study will use this definition and use codes of ethics and conduct interchangeably. Since the goal of this research is to gain insight on students' interpretations of these codes, it is of greater value to understand their definitions of these terms.

Mustang Media Group is a student media organization based in the journalism department of California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly). Mustang Media Group includes digital, print, radio and television reporting, and public relations. Throughout this paper, Mustang Media Group will be referred to as MMG.

Research Questions

The following questions were written to determine what current students believed the purpose of a code of conduct was. The goal of the research was to better understand how students approach codes of conduct and how they perceive them to be utilized.

1. What do you look for in a code of conduct?
2. What should the consequence of violating a code of conduct be?
3. Are there specific ethical issues a code of conduct should cover?
4. Are there any further comments you have regarding a possible code of conduct?

Organization of study

This paper seeks to understand what students perceive codes of conduct to be and what their importance is. Chapter one of this paper will introduce the topic and establish a background for the subject. Chapter two will examine the current research relating to the subject of ethics and conduct codes, and how it applies to student media organizations. Chapter three will explain the methodology of the research by examining how the data and interviews were conducted. Chapter four will explain the findings of the research. Lastly, chapter five will review the findings and give recommendations for future research. Chapter five will also serve as the conclusion of this paper.

Chapter 2

Literature review

This literature review focuses on existing literature on codes of conduct, and how they interact with the field of journalism. It will attempt to cover the history of conduct codes and their application in the modern media climate. This review will also cover literature on student media and the unique position that it fills. The aim of this review is to gain an understanding of what research has already been done into conduct codes and their applications in a student media setting.

Codes of conduct

Codes of ethics and conduct have long been present in varied professional settings. As Sukdeo (2019) points out, code implementation can change drastically depending on the industry and the code itself. These codes operate on a spectrum. (p. 47). Ethical codes are important as in the field of sociology, they are one of the marks of an occupation becoming a profession (Dige, 2009, p 89).

Journalism codes of conduct

In the journalism industry, codes of ethics and conduct can come from a specific media organization, or industry wide organizations. The first journalistic codes seen in the 1920's were an attempt to combat "public disillusionment" with journalism (Wilkins & Brennen, p 297). One of the earliest professional standards came from the American Society of Newspaper Editors's "seven canons of journalism" in 1923 (p. 297). This standard did not carry any weight of law or any form of implementation in an actual newsroom. Ethics codes that come from a team of industry professionals can only serve as a goal for different media companies to strive for. As

mentioned in chapter 1, the Society of Professional Journalists has had an ethics code for over 100 years (SPJ). This is one of the most respected codes in journalism, but as Slattery (2016) says, the code remains more “vertical than horizontal”(p. 13). Broad codes that are designed to apply to the entire industry tend to speak to more general principles and less to specific practices. This type of code should be viewed separately from company specific codes as those codes can be tied to employment.

Student media ethics

There has been extensive research into the importance of learned ethics in a student media environment. Conway & Groshek (2009) determined that “the socialization process cultivated in practical media environments (student media and internships) is quite potent in positively influencing students' ethical perceptions” (p. 480).

Conway & Groshek’s findings indicate that student journalists grow more aware of ethics during their time in college (p. 477). Since this growth occurs over several years in a journalism program, student reporters are not equipped with an understanding of journalism ethics when they begin working for a student media organization. Kostyu (1990) conducted a survey of college students in 1990 and found that “a practical foundation of media ethics needs to be laid at the undergraduate level” (p. 55). This research points to the need for a code of conduct in any student media organization. Student journalists are unprepared to assess ethical violations as they enter college.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter will explain the methodology of the research done for this paper.

Data Sources

This study will focus on the students impacted by a potential code of conduct. Since the goal of this research is to understand what current students perceive a code of conduct to be, all subjects in this research are current members of MMG. Six responses were recorded as part of this study. Three people were picked at random from MMG to do an online video meeting. Those people were MMG Digital Manager Victoria Bochniak, MMG video team member Ava Kershner, and KCPR reporter Alexa Kushner. In addition to the live interviews, an online survey was sent out to every member of MMG via the messaging software Slack. That survey received 3 written responses from anonymous MMG members.

Participants

The three named participants represented different sections within MMG. Victoria Bochniak was a third year journalism major and was the digital manager in charge of the design of the Mustang News website. Ava Kershner was a fourth year journalism major and was a video team member who specialized in video broadcast reporting. Alexa Kushner was a fourth year journalism major and was a KCPR news anchor who produced audio news stories for MMG.

The three anonymous participants reported to be MMG members who were majoring in journalism.

Interview Design

For the online survey, prior to taking the survey, anonymous respondents were notified about the subject matter. After they had begun the survey, respondents were asked four questions.

1. What do you look for in a code of conduct?
2. What should the consequence of violating a code of conduct be?
3. Are there specific ethical issues a code of conduct should cover?
4. Are there any further comments you have regarding a possible code of conduct?

There was no time limit to the survey, and the questions were in written response format.

For live interviews, respondents were told about the subject of the interview before it was conducted. Respondents were asked the same questions as the survey and were not given the questions in advance of the interviews.

Data Collection

In total, three interviews were conducted with the named sources and three separate anonymous sources submitted written responses. The data was collected from March to June of 2022. Each interviewee was asked all four questions and was given an opportunity to consider each point before responding.

Each live interview took five minutes or less to complete.

Data Presentation

Online survey respondents filled out comments on a google forms survey. All responses were saved on google forms and were transferred onto a document for preservation. Live interviews were recorded using Zoom video conferencing software. Complete recordings of every interview were saved as downloaded video files. Subsequently, transcripts of each interview were produced to form a comprehensive account of the interviewees responses.

Delimitations

Before analysis can occur, some limitations in the data collection method should be examined. Because this is a study of qualitative data, results of the study should not be applied to the general public. Additionally, all respondents are members of MMG and thus share similar interests and backgrounds. This data should not be applied to all codes of conducts or to the general population. This data is based on a limited number of responses. Such a small dataset should not be extrapolated to apply to larger groups as the accuracy of the findings would be diminished. This study is designed to apply specifically to MMG and the applications should be limited as such. If a future study would seek to use these findings, the authors should seek considerably more responses before applying the results to a larger population. Parts of this study relied on anonymous replies to a survey. Such replies cannot be verified as coming from actual members of MMG. While access to the survey was only given to MMG members, it is possible that some other individual gained access to the site and submitted responses to the prompts.

Chapter 4

Findings

This chapter will examine responses to the four questions posed. Direct quotations from respondents will be used to most accurately represent their positions. Those responses will be examined to look for similarities between other respondents. Additionally this study will compare respondent's answers with the literature on the subject.

Question 1: What do you look for in a code of conduct?

The aim of this question was to establish a baseline for what students believed a code of conduct is. Each respondent was given time to reflect on the question before responding. Online respondents were not given a time limit to answer the question.

The following are the responses to the question posed above.

Anonymous respondent 1: "a strong focus on the balance of ethics and bias in social media posting."

Anonymous respondent 2: "Main rules and protocols of an organization"

Anonymous respondent 3: "Rules"

Victoria Bochniak: "I feel like a code of conduct is needed in every professional organization, but especially in something like MMG because it outlines how to conduct oneself professionally and how to best instill an organization's practices and their goals. Overall what I'm looking for is to understand what a company or organization's goals are and what they look

for in their students and what they expect from us and how they expect us to conduct ourselves both in the newsroom and outside”

Ava Kershner: “What I look for in a code of conduct for journalism is special attention to the practice of fair journalism and a focus on journalism ethics.”

Alexa Kushner: “I look for a road map for the do’s and don'ts of journalism, I want it to be a helpful source for me if I have trouble with AP style or like ethics, general rules for example the kin coffee debacle, something like that should have been in the code of conduct right? Just like a general guide map of the do’s and don’ts so I don’t find myself in an ethical dilemma.”

Analysis of responses to question 1

It was clear from the responses that two separate views of codes of conduct exist. One is a more general interpretation of the question that defines a code of conduct as a list of rules for an organization. The second view grounded the question in journalism and included a more specific interpretation of what a code of conduct is.

The live interview respondents viewed codes of conduct as more than just rules of an organization. Victoria Bochniak, and Alexa Kushner viewed codes of conduct as both rulebooks, and guidebooks for how a journalist should act. In Victoria Bochniak’s response, she outlined how she believes a code of conduct should include what an organization's goals are in addition to what the rules are.

Question 2: What should the consequence of violating a code of conduct be?

This question attempted to gauge what students believed was a fair response to a violation of a code of conduct. The goal of this question was to gain a better understanding of students' beliefs on the severity of a code of conduct violation. Each respondent was given time to reflect on the question before responding. Online respondents were not given a time limit to answer the question.

The following are the responses to the question posed above.

Anonymous respondent 1: "Suspension from Mustang News until workshops are performed, then back on a trial basis."

Anonymous respondent 2: "Depends on what is violated. If it's very severe, then potentially removal from MMG but that would likely be for something really bad or if it has been an on-going issue and you have already given warnings."

Anonymous respondent 3: "Suspension from shows."

Victoria Bochniak: "There should be multiple levels of violating the conduct. Kinda how there is at school but maybe not exactly. I know we're all adults but in a way working in MMG is our first job for most of us, especially in journalism, so in the case of if there would be a code of conduct it's understandable that sometimes accidents do happen. In that case, meeting together with the student, especially with the individual who caught it. Meeting up with individuals who are higher up in MMG and not necessarily giving them any type of punishment, but just explaining what went wrong, and working to fix that, especially the first time. For more serious

occurrences, I don't know what other organizations do. I'm sure the number of times it happens really dictates what the consequence should be.”

Ava Kershner: “It would depend on what was violated however, I think there should be stages of consequences. For example if you violate the code of conduct once you should get a chance to explain yourself and learn from your mistake, but if you violate it more than once harsher actions should be taken.”

Alexa Kushner: “I think suspension from the group and like a warning, I think just like a warning and a talking to and a warning and then the next time they mess up like and they're just not paying attention then a suspension or getting kicked out of the group.”

Analysis of responses to question 2

Out of the many responses to this question, one clear point was emphasized. Most respondents believed in some form of two strike policy where MMG members would be given a warning and a meeting with leadership upon their first offense. After this first warning, any following violation would be met with suspension from MMG. Anonymous respondent 1 provided a unique idea for code of conduct violations. They supported a workshop format where violating members would have to take additional training courses before returning to MMG.

Question 3: Are there specific ethical issues a code of conduct should cover?

The goal of this question was to determine what current students believed were the most pressing ethical issues facing journalism today. By asking a broad question, respondents were encouraged to respond with what naturally comes to their mind as important areas to cover. Each respondent was given time to reflect on the question before responding. Online respondents were not given a time limit to answer the question.

The following are the responses to the question posed above.

Anonymous respondent 1: “The difference of posting on social media to make those aware and to persuade.”

Anonymous respondent 2: “Offering anonymity to sources and conflicts of interest.”

Anonymous respondent 3: “No.”

Victoria Bochniak: “I did mention at the beginning social media and I think that's a big thing, not only what we post and what we represent, but also how we use social media within the organization if that makes sense. I think that was one of the biggest things.”

Ava Kershner: “It is easy to cut out bias from a written news story and a bit more difficult to cut out bias from someone's tone of voice when they are reading a story on the radio. I feel like radio and TV presence and voice should also be taught at Cal Poly in order to make sure students are not putting their own feelings into how they act.”

Alexa Kushner: “I think interviews. Interviews, interviews, interviews. Because they are giving their time to help you and help this story, we need to be as respectful and ethical as we can to our interviewees. Because we would be nothing without them so definitely that should be the highlight.”

Analysis of responses to question 3

The responses touched on a wide range of issues with no clear unifying answer. Only one answer was repeated, social media use. This speaks to the many issues that current members find pressing in student media. While social media use holds a plurality of responses, many other issues were considered important by respondents.

Question 4: Are there any further comments you have regarding a possible code of conduct?

The goal of this question was to cover any areas not mentioned in the previous questions. By opening the discussion to what the respondents felt was important, they were able to further explain their beliefs on what a code of conduct should be. Each respondent was given time to reflect on the question before responding. Online respondents were not given a time limit to answer the question.

The following are the responses to the question posed above.

(Anonymous respondents 1 and 2 left this answer field blank.)

Anonymous respondent 3: “The code of conduct is important but I think it’s good to remember we do this for free and a lot of us do this for fun and don’t want it to be too strict.”

Victoria Bochniak: “I don’t have any more questions.”

Ava Kershner: “I feel like the code of conduct should be more present in the journalism students' daily life.”

Alexa Kushner: “I think the formatting should be easy to read and very clear.”

Analysis of responses to question 4

The responses to this final question reflect an undercurrent in a lot of the comments made during this research. Respondents voiced their support for a code of conduct while at the same time urging caution in its application. They also spoke to a desire for clearer guidelines as it pertains to ethics and conduct.

Chapter 5

Discussions and Recommendations

Summary

The goal of the study was to gain insight into how current students view codes of conduct and what they believe are necessary components to such a document. As journalists across the country continue to face accusations of dishonesty, the demand for codes of conduct rises. Student media is caught in a middle ground where reporters are still in training, but are held to the same ethical standards as a working professional. This creates a delicate balance for any possible code of conduct, as many student reporters do not have much, if any, experience in the field. Part of the stated mission of MMG is to be the ultimate source of news at Cal Poly. Since their goal is to be a legitimate news source, MMG must find a way to develop a code of conduct even as it is staffed entirely by inexperienced reporters. This study explores what a code of conduct should look like from students' perspectives given the unique position of a student media organization.

In order to assess this, six student reporters were asked four different questions relating to codes of conduct. Those four questions were the following.

1. What do you look for in a code of conduct?
2. What should the consequence of violating a code of conduct be?
3. Are there specific ethical issues a code of conduct should cover?
4. Are there any further comments you have regarding a possible code of conduct?

These questions were developed with the goal of determining what issues mattered most to student reporters. The secondary goal of the questions was to determine what student reporters considered fair and unfair in regards to how a possible code of conduct would be implemented. While the data collected was qualitative in nature, key themes and trends could be pulled from the responses. The following section will examine those trends and discuss them.

Discussion

Strictly examining the responses to the four questions prompted, some conclusions can be drawn. This section shall examine the responses to each question.

Question 1: What do you look for in a code of conduct?

By reviewing the analysis of question one in chapter 4 we can determine that there are two main takeaways that students have pertaining to what they look for in a code of conduct. The first is simply a set of rules. Students seek out codes of conduct as a means of knowing what rules there are in a given organization. The second interpretation of a code of conduct is the general ideals and goals of an organization. This dichotomy speaks to Black and Barney's (1985) explanation of the divide between general codes and specific codes (p. 31). Students are defining a difference between a general code of ethics and a specific code of conduct where Laas et al (2022) argue that they are one in the same (p. 2).

Question 2: What should the consequence of violating a code of conduct be?

Student reporters were in general agreement in the answering of this question. Given that students are still in training, virtually every respondent supported a two strike policy. They believed that one violation of the code of conduct would not merit removal from student media,

but rather an intervention from those in leadership roles. Should there be further conduct violations, most students supported suspension.

Question 3: Are there specific ethical issues a code of conduct should cover?

Responses to this question illustrate the need for a code of conduct within MMG. Virtually every student cited a different area where they would like a policy to be codified. One student referenced events from the past school year where they believed a code of conduct would be beneficial in resolving an ethical issue. While the responses were verified, the end result of the research was that every student believed there was some area that needed clarification.

Question 4: Are there any further comments you have regarding a possible code of conduct?

As this question was meant to give students an opportunity to mention issues that had not otherwise been brought up, there were less responses. Those who chose to respond to this prompt emphasized different factors that make a student media code of conduct unique. One anonymous respondent felt it was important to emphasize that student media is not as important as traditional media and thus any sort of code of conduct should take that into account. Two other respondents cited the need for a code of conduct that is both actively referenced and easy to understand.

Recommendations for Practice

The results of this study can now be analyzed to determine what are the best recommendations for practice. While the sample size is limited, there are enough respondents to determine what student reporters at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo believe is important.

Guidebook & Rulebook

When writing a code of conduct for a student media organization, it is of the utmost importance that it be digestible to the average reader. Considering that college media organizations are staffed by novice reporters, a code of conduct must serve a double purpose. First, it should feature the rules of an organization and a list of what members can and cannot do both in the field and in their personal time. Second, it should be a guidebook for new reporters to learn the best practices in the field of journalism. While the majority of members in MMG are journalism majors and are expected to learn these practices as part of their curriculum, this is not a prerequisite to becoming a member of MMG. This fact is applicable to the broader student media world as well. Even if a student media organization requires its members to be journalism majors, it is unlikely that every member will have completed a journalism ethics course before joining the organization.

Two strikes and you're out

It became clear over the course of the study that Journalism students support some form of consequence for those who violate the code of conduct. In the professional media world a violation of a code of conduct could result in a termination of employment. This severity of punishment is unhelpful to students learning the occupation for the first time. It is expected that

individuals who have never done journalism will make some mistakes. Student reporters are not expected to violate a code of conduct, but in the circumstance that they do, it is best if they are given the opportunity to learn from their mistake instead of being faced with immediate suspension. If a student reporter continually violates the code after being given a warning, removal from the organization might be necessary. Given that student media is still a training ground, reporters who continually violate the code should be given the opportunity to complete workshops in journalism ethics. As new students are interacting with the public in a reporter capacity for the first time, some inexperience is expected. Any code violation should consider the students inexperience when determining what their consequence should be.

Study Conclusion

In conclusion, student media organizations are in a unique position of being both legitimate news organizations and training grounds for new reporters. This environment creates the need for a code of conduct that is specifically fitted for student media.

Further research is needed to assess what specific elements of student media need to be addressed in codes of conduct. This study examined the research into codes of conduct and determined that further research ought to be done specifically into codes of conduct for student media organizations. The research done as part of the study is not statistically significant and should not be extrapolated for a large population. The students studied as part of this research provide an educational opportunity for future research as a way to understand what students' opinions on codes of conduct are. Future writers of codes of conduct can use this study as a basis for what students perceive as important in this area. Future researchers can use this study as a basis for further examinations of codes of conduct for student media organizations.

One fact has become clear over the course of this study, students both want and need an ethical guidebook for their work in student media organizations. Incoming students are not properly equipped with the skills necessary for ethical journalism. While further research is needed to determine what areas students need guidance in the most, the demand for a code of ethics designed to guide new reporters is clear.

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