

SPJ Code of Ethics Revision Process

Version 2.0 (May 6, 2014)

Process Overview

This memo outlines the process for revising the SPJ Code of Ethics, which was last updated in 1996. Ultimately, only the SPJ delegates have the authority make changes to the code. Any delegate can propose changes at the national convention, but typically changes have been made through a process that solicits suggestions from members, non-members and leaders in journalism ethics. This revision process mirrors previous revisions, but adds more opportunities for input based on the technology available today. The Ethics Committee has been tasked with gathering input, crafting a revised code (likely several drafts), bounce it off other groups, such as the SPJ Board, and offer it to the delegates at EIJ14 Sept. 4-7 for their consideration. The delegates may adopt it, adopt it with modifications, reject it, or ask for more information and further consideration at EIJ15.

Phase 1: Initial Draft (August 2013-April 2014)

The first phase focused on gathering input from inside and outside SPJ and crafting an initial draft:

1. **Big-picture discussion:** After hearing from journalists inside and outside of SPJ regarding the need for a code update, then-incoming-President David Cuillier scheduled a town hall meeting at the EIJ13 convention in Anaheim in August 2014. The gathering was led by Ethics Committee Chairman Kevin Smith and various views were expressed.
2. **Task assigned:** Following the open discussion, Cuillier directed the Ethics Committee to solicit feedback and craft an update that delegates could consider at EIJ14 in Nashville.
3. **Working group formed:** Smith created a working group consisting of the 10-member committee, as well as eight ethics experts from outside the committee, including Kelly McBride from the Poynter Institute, social media pro Monica Guzman, and others (Chris Roberts, Carole Fedlman, Tom Kent, Jan Leach, Stephen Ward, Lynn Walsh). The group also solicited feedback from the members and the public via e-mail, social media and other SPJ communication tools. In addition, a digital subcommittee was formed to provide input on new ethical challenges resulting from emerging technology.
4. **Four-section assignment:** In late January, the ethics group was divided into four groups, each responsible for taking first crack at each section in the code: Seek Truth and Report It, Minimize Harm, Act Independently, and Be Accountable. The public comments and the digital subcommittee report were shared with the groups before they crafted their respective sections. When the groups were done, they gave their drafts to one of the other groups for editing.
 - **The work groups were as follows** (*denotes core ethics committee member):
 - Seek Truth — *Irwin Gratz, *Mike Farrell, Monica Guzman, Jan Leach
 - Minimize Harm — *Kevin Smith, *Andrew Seaman, Chris Roberts, Carole Feldman
 - Act Independently — *Paul Fletcher, *Lauren Bartlett, Lynn Walsh, Stephen Ward
 - Be Accountable — *Fred Brown, *Hagit Limor, Kelly McBride

5. **First draft compilation:** Smith then compiled all the drafts into one version and distributed it in late March for discussion at SPJ spring regional conferences. It was posted on the SPJ website (<http://blogs.spjnetwork.org/ethics/2014/03/27/ethics-code-revisions-our-first-draft/>) and more than 600 suggestions were gathered via the blog, an online form at TinyURL.com/EthicsCodeFeedback, conferences, and email sent directly to Smith.

Phase 2: Public Outreach and Revision (May-July 2014)

The next phase is to gather as much feedback as possible from members, non-member journalists, the public, ethics scholars and other constituencies, and work through two more drafts. Starting in May, a steering group of Smith, Walsh and Andrew Seaman, aided by SPJ Executive Director Joe Skeel, will coordinate outreach and communications efforts. Also, the new SPJ communications strategist will likely be assigned to assist with outreach. They include:

1. **Website update:** A new webpage just for the code revision will be created, rather than relying on the blog format. Information about the revision process will be posted as it progresses, including various efforts to collect input, and a time line for what is ahead in the process. Also, bios and headshots for the working group will be added to the website, as well as news coverage about the ethics code revision. The target launch date for the site is May 19.
2. **Comment aggregation:** Seaman is setting up an online comment aggregation tool so that the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of comments can be aggregated and assimilated in some relative order. The comments will be available online for anyone to see and should help the committee make sense of the prevailing thoughts.
3. **Online solicitations:** With the conclusion of the final SPJ Spring Conference, the committee will send an email to all SPJ members and other interested parties outlining the rest of the drafting process. Within that email, there will be a link for people to submit comments, suggestions and questions.
4. **Tumblr page:** Lynn Walsh created a Tumblr page (<http://www.tumblr.com/blog/spjethics>) that could also be used to curate comments and spark discussion.
5. **Twitter chats:** In an effort to bring in people outside SPJ, the committee is planning to organize Twitter chats with well-known groups. Those included so far are MuckRack (Tuesday, May 13) and #WJchat. Through all of our Twitter discussions, we will be using the hashtag: #SPJethics.
6. **Newsroom outreach:** Walsh will reach out to newsrooms. People can forward copies of the draft to their colleagues for feedback, or they can hold small focus group within their own newsrooms to submit the recommendations.
7. **Other publicity:** In addition to the previous ways of communicating about the Code, the steering committee is looking at other possibilities proposed by Michael Koretzky, including:
 - Interested board members and other SPJ leaders personally contacting industry thought leaders to make suggestions.
 - SPJ polling every journalism ethics professor in the country.
 - SPJ leaders asking to present at other organizations' conventions.

- Consider spending a few hundred dollars on PPC and leveraging SEO on the page, maybe installing Yoast on all Ethics-related material.
 - Asking candidates for SPJ office to comment on the Code revamp.
 - Membership emails linking directly to curated, interactive pages.
8. **Second draft:** The revision work group will continue revising the draft, based on the feedback gathered. Comments must be received by June 30, and then a second draft will be finished by the committee in July, along with an explanation of why certain types comments were included and others were not. Realistically, we will have hundreds, if not thousands of comments, so every suggestion cannot be incorporated, but a general discussion of thinking in the revision with comment themes will be provided. The second draft will be posted online and distributed through the communication channels described above.

Phase 3: Final Revisions (July-September 2014)

The final phase will involve polishing the third draft and bouncing it off select audiences before presentation to the delegates for a September vote.

1. **Third draft:** The working group will meet in person in July to hash out the final points of contention and produce a polished third draft. The meeting will be streamed live and viewers may post comments as it happens.
2. **Sounding boards:** Ideally, a panel discussion with ombudsmen and standards editors will be set up to discuss the third draft and to gather outside viewpoints. Also, in August the SPJ Board will discuss the draft in a conference call and consider making its advisory recommendation to the delegates on whether to approve the draft. Lastly, we will have a session at EIJ14 so attendees can discuss the latest draft.
3. **Membership vote:** A question will be put on the membership ballot this fall so members can vote on their level of support or non-support for the revisions. This vote will be advisory to the delegates, and non-binding.
4. **Delegate discussion:** At EIJ14 in Nashville in September, the delegates will have the opportunity to approve the final draft, not approve it, approve it with amended changes, consider other versions, or postpone consideration for further review and discussion. The board and president will take direction from the delegates if further discussion or action is necessary.
5. **Code promotion:** If the code updates are approved, SPJ's communications strategist will develop a plan for distributing and promoting the revised Code to all of the appropriate stakeholders including but not limited to SPJ members, non-members, journalism schools, other journalism organizations and the media.