

MINUTES
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS
SATURDAY, JULY 13, 2019
TELECONFERENCE AND VIDEOCONFERENCE MEETINGS

EXECUTIVE SESSION

A closed meeting was called to order by teleconference to discuss national awards at 11:03 a.m EDT with all members present: President J. Alex Tarquinio; President-elect Patti Newberry; Secretary-Treasurer Matthew Hall; Vice President of Campus Chapter Affairs Sue Kopen Katcef; At-Large Director Lauren Bartlett and Region 3 Director Michael Koretzky. Others present: Director of Communications and Marketing Jennifer Royer and Program Coordinator Matthew Kent. The meeting ended at 11:53 a.m. EDT.

PUBLIC SESSION

MEETING CALLED TO ORDER

A public meeting was called to order by videoconference at 12:03 p.m EDT with all members present: President J. Alex Tarquinio; President-elect Patti Newberry; Secretary-Treasurer Matthew Hall; At-Large Director Lauren Bartlett, Region 3 Director Michael Koretzky and Vice President of Campus Chapter Affairs Sue Kopen Katcef, who joined the meeting in process. Many others were present, including Director of Communications and Marketing Jennifer Royer and Program Coordinator Matthew Kent; at the meeting's peak, 49 people were taking part in the videoconference call.

MEMBERSHIP DRIVE

The committee discussed a proposal from Membership Committee Chair Colin DeVries to offer discounted SPJ membership dues in August as part of the runup to the annual SPJ journalism conference, EIJ19. Discussion revolved around the size of the subsidy, whether it would apply to new and renewing members and how long it might extend. Office Manager Linda Hall suggested annual SPJ dues could be reduced from \$75 for professional members and \$37.50 for student members to \$50 and \$25, respectively. SPJ member Hazel Becker suggested that the two-week window should open on July 30 because the conference pre-registration deadline is Aug. 12. SPJ member Forrest Gossett suggested excluding existing members could create resentment. SPJ member Bob Becker said dues are "not that high now" for members and that he saw no benefit,

and some downside, to extending a discount to current members. SPJ member Joel Bellman asked if there wouldn't be a significant potential revenue hit if we extend the discount to existing members. Gossett said it would be a larger revenue hit if we lose members who feel left out. SPJ member Liz Enochs suggested existing members could get renewal discounts in August that apply whenever their current membership expires.

The committee voted to have DeVries and the membership committee create a one-page proposal for discounted membership from August 1 to August 15. Motion: Newberry. Second: Bartlett. Vote: unanimous.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SEARCH COMMITTEE UPDATE

The chair of the executive director search task force, Hagit Limor, gave an update on the search. She said SPJ had hired consultants from Talbott Talent to help with the hiring, and they have been preparing survey questions for the SPJ board, the SPJ Foundation board and SPJ staff. Board surveys should be distributed and completed between July 15 and July 19 with staff surveys following July 22 to July 26. She said that any SPJ member can contribute to the process and added that potential applicants should be encouraged to send cover letters and resumes to spj@talbotttalent.com. The timeline includes a candidate position profile being drafted by July 31 and finalized by Aug. 3, with interviews to follow and recommendations by Oct. 8 with a start date a month after a person were to accept the position. Talbott representatives plan to give public presentations to both the SPJ board and the SPJ Foundation board on progress at meetings at EIJ19 in San Antonio in early September. In response to requests from members to share the cost of the consulting contract, Limor said the contract expressly forbids such a disclosure because it's proprietary information for a private company.

PUBLIC COMMENT

The committee began public comment at 12:20 p.m. EDT and the roughly 72-minute public discussion largely revolved around what members want to see in a new executive director (ED), calls for transparency, past board tensions and better board collaboration.

SPJ member Hazel Becker said she wants the ED to be someone who knows journalism, not just someone who is an experienced association director, and also someone who is strong enough to "carry the day when the board goes rogue."

Gossett objected "strenuously" to the confidentiality of the contract and to the board not being more open about it. He said his comments were not a reflection on Talbott but that SPJ owes it to its members to be fully transparent.

SPJ member Jonathan Make said he represented the views of chapters in D.C., Los Angeles, San Diego, Chicago, Florida; chapter leaders in Minnesota, Maryland and New England and Region 8 regional coordinator Kathryn Jones. He said he wants an ED who puts the practice of journalism above their own self-interest; who puts journalism leadership first above fundraising ability; has a track record of being a manager and both a consensus-seeker and consensus-builder; is committed to transparency, even and especially when the news is bad; wants the job for the long-term, at least five years; has creative ideas about expanding membership; and does not abuse alcohol or drugs, has never been accused of sexual harassment and doesn't place inappropriate demands on staff or volunteers.

SPJ member Mary Crowley said she is extremely concerned about SPJ's lack of transparency, from the late night notification when SPJ lost its most recent executive director to a contentious June 1 board meeting to the contract cost not being shared.

Jones said she is shocked there is not more transparency, that this goes against SPJ's Code of Ethics, smacks of hypocrisy and sets a bad example at a time when journalists are facing criticism because the lack of transparency might be used to harm journalism.

SPJ executive committee member Bartlett said a board task force is reviewing board policies, including a transparency policy, and encouraged members to weigh in.

SPJ executive committee member Hall, chair of that task force, echoed that comment.

SPJ member Rebecca Aguilar said SPJ leadership should show leadership skills and be more respectful to one another. She said our Code of Ethics says, "Do no harm."

SPJ member Dee Ann Divis said the ED should have entrepreneurial experience.

SPJ executive committee member Tarquinio said as president she had shared everything she was legally allowed to do. She added that the cost of the ED salary and search was being shared evenly between the SPJ board and the SPJ Foundation board.

SPJ member Elliot Spagat said the San Diego chapter would like to see the following in an ED: A thorough understanding of SPJ's strengths and weaknesses and lots of ideas on how to improve on them; an ability to expand membership; thoughts on how to strengthen chapters; an ability to balance competing personalities and agendas, and an ability to motivate staff. He said the ED doesn't necessarily need to be a journalist.

SPJ member Andrew Seaman suggested SPJ prepare a “playbook” for staff and the board so that when there are high-profile departures, SPJ can more easily replace the person and have a handle on what needs to be done. He said he wants to see an ED who has an honest and sincere support for journalism and the First Amendment but is also good at operating behind the scenes and keeping things together on the business side of the equation. He said an ability to get people to join SPJ and to run the organization is better than experience being a reporter.

Tarquinio said the policy review task force chaired by Hall was something she set up early in her term and identified as one of her top priorities. It had not been established in response to recent transparency concerns.

Gossett said he wants an ED who has innate leadership skills and can strike a balance between a volunteer board and staff. He asked how Talbott would identify candidates.

Limor said Talbott is a professional firm that has conducted many searches and would not be doing any “guessing.” Limor said she hoped the SPJ board’s “public spats” don’t discourage ED applicants from seeking the job. She said she wants a dynamic leader.

SPJ executive committee member Newberry asked whether the ED should be the public face and voice of SPJ or focus more on running the organization.

SPJ board member Mike Reilley said the ED needs to run the organization, period, and not be the face of it.

Crowley agreed.

Seaman agreed.

SPJ member Liz Enochs agreed.

Hazel Becker said the ED should not be SPJ’s public face unless s/he has a name in journalism and is “connected to journalism in a major way.” She said SPJ’s public face should be a journalist and that the ED doesn’t necessarily need to be a journalist.

Reilley said the two objectives are not mutually exclusive and that SPJ can find a great association manager with journalism ties

Seaman said the bottom line is the ED should help SPJ survive from a business standpoint and that volunteer leaders and SPJ's Journalist on Call should be the ones to help make it soar.

Newberry said she'd like SPJ to consider some sharing of speaking and public outreach.

Crowley said she envisions an ED who understands advocacy and would be skilled enough to deploy SPJers, especially chapter presidents, to make public appearances.

Divis suggested that both the ED and president and at least one other person be trained to be spokespersons because there will be times — like after the shooting at the Capital Gazette — that more people are needed, and there are always schedule challenges.

Aguilar said she loves SPJ and she thinks it's "crucial" that Koretzky take down an edited video he made of the June 1 board meeting because it is damaging to SPJ and Tarquinio.

Bob Becker said SPJ has tried to have the ED be the face of SPJ several times in the past with "marginal to disastrous results" and that aiming for that limits the pool of applicants who could manage the organization well.

Reilley said taking down Koretzky's video would accomplish nothing as it's already been copied, shared and written about.

Gossett said personal attacks by anyone go overboard and that they are offensive.

SPJ board member Ivette Davila-Richards thinks the ED and president should work together but that normally it should be the president acting as the face of SPJ unless the president is unavailable in which case the ED could step up. She said SPJ looks dysfunctional and is putting people off with some of its activity in recent months.

Hazel Becker said maybe SPJ should just stop talking about Koretzky's video.

Crowley agreed.

SPJ member Randy Showstack said being the public face of SPJ could be a shared responsibility between the ED and the board president, depending on the issue.

SPJ member Rhett Wilkinson noted that the president's term lasts only for one year.

Enochs said she is dismayed by Koretzky's video and accompanying blog post because the discussion created public discord. She said that that is divisive and problematic.

SPJ member Robert Leger said when he was SPJ board president, he thought the president should be the face of the organization but that some presidents have been uncomfortable with that role so it would be good to have an ED that could be first alternate. He said an organization like RTDNA has an executive that's the face of it.

Davila-Richards said the Koretzky video needs to be taken down.

Wilkinson said Koretzky's blog post "is journalism" and that "we are a journalism organization."

Seaman said the best way to move on from the video of the June 1 meeting is to have more productive meetings like this one.

Wilkinson agreed, saying great productive meetings like this are the best way to deal with it, and that taking the video down would not be transparent.

Hazel Becker said she didn't like Koretzky's post but that it's his "personal thing."

Aguilar said the video should be taken down as it could harm Tarquinio's reputation.

Newberry said she really appreciates everyone taking the time to be on today's call to discuss the executive director search, the need to be transparent and other matters. She apologized as she had before for her role in the June 1 meeting, said there had been bad communication between her and Tarquinio but that she has moved on and that she talks to Tarquinio frequently because that's what you do: eat crow, communicate and deal with the issues, such as important ones like hiring a new ED. She said there will be public comment at all meetings in her presidency and invited everyone to attend public meetings at EIJ19.

Tarquinio noted that the board always includes public comment period at its meetings.

SPJ member Irwin Gratz said today's meeting went well and called attention to the imminent conclusion of SPJ's Casper Project in Casper, Wyoming, designed to build trust in journalism. He touted the work of Journalist on Call Rod Hicks and said it's what SPJ can do when it focuses on what it should -- improving and protecting journalism.

Limor said one blog post may not torpedo an organization but that it's been a multitude of insults and an accumulation of inventory that has tarnished SPJ's reputation this year. She said SPJ should move on from this day, be respectful and stop past issues and that SPJ would find a great ED and let future presidents thrive.

Tarquinio noted the logistics of the videoconference worked very well, thanks to staff.

Make said his hopes for greater transparency include information being released during business hours and displayed prominently in blog posts and on the website. He asked if the Talbott consultants would get a transcript of this call and about its involvement in the drafting of surveys. He read a statement from Detroit SPJ calling for more transparency, more openness in its search for the next ED and "discourse in a democratic fashion."

SPJ staff member Royer emphasized the late-night communications are "not our normal operating procedures." She said staff has been juggling a lot at "a highly unusual time of just trying to keep things afloat" and is looking forward to an ED "who will work well with the president and HQ on workflow and procedures so everything works more smoothly."

Tarquinio clarified that a membership survey was being prepared by SPJ's long-term strategic planning task force, and that Talbott was surveying both SPJ boards and staff.

Limor noted the call was being recorded and would be viewed by Talbott. She said other ideas are welcome and to keep them coming as the process continues.

With the discussion over, the executive committee voted to return to executive session.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

The committee voted at 1:32 p.m. EDT to resume its executive session by teleconference to discuss national awards. Motion: Bartlett. Second: Hall. Vote: unanimous. Executive session ended at 2:37 p.m. EDT, and the meeting adjourned.