MINUTES
MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS
JAN. 19, 2013
ANAHEIM, CALIFORNIA

MEETING CALLED TO ORDER
With President Sonny Albarado presiding, the meeting of the executive committee of the Society of Professional Journalists was called to order at 9 a.m. on Saturday, Jan. 19, 2013, at the Marriott in Anaheim, Calif.

ROLL CALL
In addition to Albarado, the following were present: President-Elect Dave Cuillier; Secretary-Treasurer Dana Neuts; Vice President for Campus Chapter Affairs Neil Ralston; Immediate Past President John Ensslin; Director at-Large Bill McCloskey; Region 2 Director Brian Eckert. Staff members in attendance were Executive Director Joe Skeel and Associate Executive Director Chris Vachon. Lauren Bartlett from the L.A. Pro Chapter was also present.

MEETING MINUTES APPROVED
Upon proper motion and seconded by McCloskey and Ralston, respectively, the committee approved the minutes from the following executive committee meetings:

- December 19, 2012, Conference Call
- November 20, 2012, Conference Call
- July 21, 2012, Washington, D.C. with the following correct:
  - Page 12, in reference to Zayed University's chapter in Abu Dhabi, change the last sentence to read "As a result, SPJ plans on sending representatives..." The reason for the change is that the trip to the Abu Dhabi conference was canceled.

Upon proper motion and seconded by McCloskey and Neuts, respectively, the committee approved the minutes from the following delegate meetings:

- September 20, 2012, Ft Lauderdale, Opening Business Session
- September 22, 2012, Ft Lauderdale, Closing Business Session with the following correct:
  - Under Resolution 7, correct Mark Pitch to Pitsch

PRESIDENT'S REPORT
President Sonny Albarado reported that much of his time has been spent on journalists' arrests related to Occupy movements. In several situations, the national organization partnered with local chapters on this issue. In a letter that went out to many law enforcement agencies, suggestions were made about better training for police officers. Only one law enforcement agency responded stating that as long as there is an active case, they can't talk to SPJ. On the other hand, SPJ saw success with a student photographer situation at Occupy Atlanta. It took a year, but the charges against the student have been dropped.

Albarado indicated that he has also been spending time on an openness proposal from Dave Cuillier and social media guidelines developed by an SPJ task force.
Albarado informed the group that his trip to Abu Dabai was canceled because the journalism conference scheduled at Zayed University was canceled.

SDX FOUNDATION REPORT
Associate Executive Director Vachon reported a successful end-of-year giving campaign with an eight percent return rate of just under $3,000. In 2012, the Foundation raised $60,000.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REPORT
Executive Director Joe Skeel reports that the database upgrade is enhancing our operations, but it is not without its share of hiccups and glitches during this initial stage of implementation. In addition, Skeel suggested that SPJ consider moving away from our outdated (and current) tape drive back-up system and move to a cloud system. He will be researching the costs associated with such an upgrade.

Skeel informed the group that since the board meeting at convention, two new business partners have been added. RTDNA has hired SPJ for its bookkeeping and payroll services and NAHJ has hired SPJ for its payroll services (in addition to the membership and bookkeeping services SPJ has been supplying to NAHJ for the past year). Additionally, NAHJ is partnering with SPJ and RTDNA for the annual conference.

Skeel touched on the staff restructuring process that began a year ago. He feels positive progress has been made and that the staffing decisions he made in 2012 were the right decisions. Skeel notes that we are still in a transition phase and that we are heading in the right direction.

COMMITTEE GRANT REQUESTS
The committee considered grant requests to endorse before they are considered by the Sigma Delta Chi Foundation.

Professional Development Committee: The committee submitted a proposal to expand the SPJ Journalism Training Program by funding the training of college newsroom staffs. The request suggested three training programs for a total of $3,000.

The Executive Committee suggested that priority be given to Collegiate Institutional member schools, that the audience for the programs be students (with faculty invited) and that we encourage more than one college to participate in each program.

Upon proper motion and seconded by Eckert and Ensslin, respectively, the committee voted to support the grant request.

Ethics Committee: The committee is proposing an ethical response/evaluation program. The concept consists of a member(s) of the ethics committee traveling to a city where a significant news event occurred involving victims of disasters and/or tragedies. In 2012 there was the Sandy Hook shooting, Super Storm Sandy and the Aurora Colo. theater shooting. Victims would be interviewed in person, at an appropriate amount of time after the event, to ascertain their
assessment of the media related to their event. The committee is requesting $3,000 for costs related to conducting a program about the Aurora shooting.

The Executive Committee suggested that the DART Center be approached about partnering on this project and that the project work closely with local chapters, when applicable, to reduce costs.

Upon proper motion and seconded by McCloskey and Ensslin, respectively, the committee voted to support the concept of the grant request.

LEGAL DEFENSE FUND
Albarado, on behalf of Legal Defense Fund chair Hagit Limor, communicated that the LDF committee would like to ask that the committee's maximum amount for LDF grants be raised from $1,000 to $5,000.

The Executive Committee indicated they would support recommending, to the SPJ Board of Directors at the April 2013 meeting, an increase in the maximum amount that the Legal Defense Fund committee has to the ability to give.

SPRING CONFERENCES
Executive Committee assigned officers to attend the SPJ regional conferences.

CONVENTION UPDATES
2013: Vachon reported that working with NAHJ for the conference is going well.
2014: The hotel contract has been signed with the Opryland Hotel in Nashville for Sept 4-6.
2015: Staff is reviewing proposals and has narrowed the city to Orlando.

THE WORKING PRESS
Skeel discussed the future role of The Working Press, the student interns who report on the convention and produce a convention newspaper.

Based on the conference partnership with RTDNA and their student intern program; the challenges that accompany producing three daily print products and the future of journalism, Skeel suggested merging the RTDNA student intern program with the SPJ Working Press to eliminate the printed paper and instead utilize social media and produce a robust website full of convention coverage.

The Executive Committee gave Skeel the authority to alter the program, but asked that he keep the Board of Directors informed of the progress at the April meeting.

DATABASE UPGRADE/NEW BILLING PROCEDURES
Skeel discussed the fact that monthly auto dues billing is still on the radar. The database upgrade had to be implemented before work on the billing could occur. However, the upgrade glitches have to be rectified before the billing can be a workable project. Once work can begin on the auto dues billing, new SPJ bookkeeper Sarah Beck will take the lead on that project. There is no
way to anticipate at this point what steps are involved and the amount of time this will take for implementation.

SUMMER EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING
The summer Executive Committee will take place in conjunction with the SDX Awards Banquet scheduled for Friday, June 21, 2013 at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. In addition, an SPJ JournCamp may be scheduled for the following day, Saturday, June 22, Washington, D.C. during the Executive Committee meeting.

FREELANCE DIGITAL RESOURCE GUIDE
Secretary-Treasurer Dana Neuts updated the committee on a guide that was developed by the freelance committee. It was free to anyone for the first week on the website and then it was put behind the firewall so that it became a member benefit. The committee has filed for copyright of the guide. There have been 346 downloads of the guide thus far.

WESTPOINT FINANCIAL GROUP/SPJ SOLUTIONS
SPJ has partnered with Westpoint Financial Group to offer insurance and financial planning to members. According to Neuts, the offering/program is being called SPJ Solutions and in the 45 days since its announcement, Westpoint has received 40 requests for quotes with five signed contracts and 14 quotes in progress. The partnership gives members the opportunity to enroll in individual life, health, disability, long-term care, personal liability, property liability and errors & omissions insurance programs.

CONTEST ADVISORY GROUP
Neuts reported on the work of this group. They are helping to pair up chapters/regions for judging purposes; they serve in an advisory capacity to contest coordinators; they conducted a webinar for contest coordinators; they have compiled a list of awards platform options and they help to hold judges accountable.

Upon proper motion and seconded by Eckert and Ensslin, respectively, the committee voted to go into executive session to discuss the L.A. Pro Chapter’s finances. They agreed executive session was warranted because of the potential for future litigation.

Upon proper motion and seconded by Eckert and Ensslin, respectively, the committee voted end the executive session.

Upon proper motion and seconded by Ensslin and Cuillier, respectively, the committee voted to recommend to the SPJ Board of Directors to extend to the Los Angeles Pro Chapter a line of credit up to the amount of $5,000 to deal with its legal fees.

SPJ TRANSPARENCY
At the request of President Albarado, President-elect Dave Cuillier put together a proposal regarding SPJ’s commitment to openness and accountability at a local, regional and national level.
The proposal is attached to these minutes as Appendix A.

The proposal deals with chapter finances and the posting of information in the spirit of open communication.

Specifically, the Executive Committee suggested that chapters post their meeting minutes with five days of their approval and that chapters respond to media inquiries in less than 24 hours. Overall, the Executive Committee liked the general concept and spirit of the ideas outlined.

Upon proper motion and seconded by Ensslin and Neuts, respectively, the committee voted to recommend to the SPJ Board of Directors the following suggestion from the proposal: *Adopt and distribute a voluntary Openness and Accountability Best Practices resource guide (draft included with the proposal, Appendix A) for chapters and regional directors that provides specific tips and model policies that can be adopted by chapters to foster trust, credibility and theft prevention. The guide could be posted online, published in Quill and provided to current and future leaders, along with the "Finances" Best Practices guide already disseminated.*

**FINANCIAL BEST PRACTICES**
One of the bullet points in Cuillier's proposal was the topic of chapter and regional bank statements and should they be collected and reviewed. It was decided this topic would be discussed separately from the rest of the proposal.

Within the last year, the organization has had two separate situations in which chapter treasurers' stole thousands of dollars from his/her chapter (and in one case even from a regional fund) accounts. Prior to the recent situations, there have been other past problems with chapter finances. The Executive Committee wants to help and the development of financial best practices was the first step. However, the question arises, should there be something in place that is not voluntary, but required, such as the openness of chapter bank statements.

Upon proper motion and seconded by Ensslin and McCloskey, respectively, the committee voted to require pro chapters to submit 12 months of chapter statements for all chapter bank accounts with their annual reports.

**SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES**
Albarado appointed a task force to develop digital communication guidelines for SPJ leaders and to address a number of specific questions stemming from previous discussions and disputes. The task force was headed by member Brandon Ballenger.

Ballenger's memo is attached as Appendix B.

Overall the Executive Committee liked the general concept and spirit of the ideas outlined. The committee suggested that the content guidelines section be reviewed by counsel. They suggested that after some editing, the guidelines be presented to the SPJ Board of Directors.

**FELLOWS OF THE SOCIETY**
Ensslin reminded the committee about how he managed the nominations process for the Fellows in 2012. The committee put together a list of prospective nominees and then the committee ranked them. The staff then invited the first person on the list to come to accept his/her recognition at the convention and in turn, also extended an invitation to speak. If the first person declined, staff moved onto the second name and the process continued until there was confirmation of attendance from the nominee. Ensslin wanted to initiate the process again for 2013 and it was decided that Albarado would send to the committee the list of names from 2012 and ask the committee to rank their choices so that the invitation can be extended soon.

MEETING ADJOURNED
The meeting was adjourned at 4:15 p.m. on Saturday, Jan. 19, 2013.
***APPENDIX A***

MEMORANDUM

DATE: Jan. 14, 2012
FROM: David Cuillier, President-Elect
SUBJ: SPJ Commitment to Openness and Accountability proposal
FOR: Executive Committee

Overview

This memorandum outlines proposals that could be recommended to the full SPJ board for fostering openness at the chapter, regional and national levels, discouraging theft and increasing confidence and trust in SPJ among members and the public. Recommendations could, for example, include creating an Openness and Accountability Best Practices guide, requiring chapters to provide bank statements with annual reports, posting SPJ budgets and other records on the main website, and fostering member discussion online and at the national convention.

Clearly, as a non-profit entity, SPJ has no legal obligation to provide anything to anyone, except for IRS 990 forms. But given that the code of ethics calls for accountability of journalists, and that they “Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others,” there is a strong feeling in the organization that we should be as open as possible without overburdening volunteer leaders and compromising proprietary information that could hurt the organization (e.g., bank account numbers that could lead to theft).

Ultimately, it all comes down to building trust among members and the public, as well as protecting the funds, integrity and credibility of SPJ by thwarting human temptation through openness and accountability. As former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis said, “Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman.”

Background

Following the Oklahoma chapter theft uncovered in 2012, and other chapter-level and regional-level financial issues, a resolution was proposed at the fall convention in Fort Lauderdale to increase chapter financial transparency, spurring robust debate. While the resolution failed, the discussion prompted action this year among some chapters, who have since adopted practices and policies aimed to prevent theft and foster openness.

A task force assigned by former President John Ennslin developed best practices for chapter finance transparency, which seem to have helped expose problems in the Los Angeles chapter, and perhaps will elsewhere, so that chapters can avoid such problems in the future. Various members have been active in this front, including Secretary-Treasurer Dana Nerts, Regional Director Carl Corry and former Regional Director Andy Schotz.

The discussion has expanded beyond chapter financial transparency, however, to include overall accountability and openness of chapters, regional directors and national headquarters. President Sonny Albarado asked that I gather information about the issue, synthesize it, and provide some recommendations to the Executive Board to discuss at the winter meeting for a potential proposal to the full board in April, and perhaps the membership at the fall convention in Anaheim. This memo outlines that information and potential action steps.
Chapters Taking Initiative

The Press Club of Long Island, which proposed the openness resolution last year, adopted a chapter policy for openness in December. They approved the policy with the intention of attracting new members and avoiding perceptions of hypocrisy – that SPJ practices accountability and openness that it preaches to government and others. The policy was posted on the SPJ blog “Garden Center” on Dec. 21 (http://blogs.spjnetwork.org/membership/2012/12/21/guest-blog-transparency-is-good-for-members-and-good-for-spj/) and four people provided feedback in the comments section, all positive. The policy states:

- The Press Club of Long Island board will post notice on the PCLI website of upcoming board meetings by the next business day after they are scheduled by the president or another officer in the president’s absence.
- Members with issues for the board to address should contact the president or another officer in the president’s absence at least one business day before a meeting and the president or another officer in the president’s absence will add the issue to the agenda.
- Board meetings are open to all PCLI members, who will be allowed to attend as observers but will be given the opportunity to address the board during the meeting where appropriate.
- A summary of all votes/actions taken by the board during a meeting will be posted on the website within five business days of the meeting.
- A summary of chapter finances is available for review by PCLI members by appointment.
- The board will respond to media requests for information on PCLI activities or comments on media issues as quickly as possibly but always within two business days.

Other chapters, as well, have begun adopting their own policies following the Oklahoma problem and debate in Fort Lauderdale. Connecticut pro is considering adopting policies that would post minutes on its website, increase financial audits on the treasurer from once a year to twice a year, and setting dollar amounts for multiple approvers of expenses. The New Jersey pro chapter and others also are talking about these issues, and could adopt new practices.

Chapter Leader Comments

On Jan. 3, I sent an email to the 236 chapter presidents, including student chapters, asking for their suggestions and thoughts regarding these openness issues. I received eight replies. Not many, but they did give me a sense of some of the concerns among chapter leaders (if you would like to see all the comments, feel free let me know and I can email them to you). A few commonalities arose:

- Some leaders are wary of national imposing detailed guidelines on local chapters, but are willing to voluntarily adopt their own practices.
- Leaders generally favor openness policies as long as they don’t over burden themselves or their officers. Simple is crucial.
- Chapters generally announce their meeting times/dates but often don’t make minutes easily accessible.
- Most chapters are fine with their meetings being open to the public, as well as most of the recommendations in the best practices. Finding someone to consistently carry out the tasks, however, can be tricky (updating the website with minutes, meeting notices, etc.).
Leaders are fine with opening their books up to anyone, but they don’t advertise the fact and don’t see a need to do so proactively, only if asked (too busy!).

It seems many chapters are provided financial reports monthly or every so often. However, they appear to be summaries from a treasurer, not including the actual bank statements. This appears to be a crucial area of vulnerability. It’s easy for treasurers to make up numbers and summaries. Reviewing actual bank statements might help.

**Proposed Action Steps**

Based on the feedback and recommendations from local and national leaders, we have a variety of steps we can take. Below are just a few ideas, and I am sure the wisdom of the staff, Executive Board and full board will flag problems and generate better ideas. But to get something on the table to work with, I would propose we recommend the following to the full board this month via email, allow online discussion among leaders and members, and then take it up at the full board meeting in April. This SPJ “Commitment to Openness and Accountability” could include:

1. Adopt and distribute a voluntary Openness and Accountability Best Practices resource guide for chapters and regional directors that provides specific tips and model policies that can be adopted by chapters to foster trust, credibility, and theft prevention. The guide could be posted online, published in Quill and provided to current and future leaders, along with the “Finances: Best Practices” guide already disseminated. Below is a draft version of such a best practices guide.

2. Designate national headquarters staff or a committee to provide basic level of chapter web support to help chapters create a website that is easily updated for blog discussion and posting meeting agendas, minutes and other records. Perhaps just create WordPress blog sites for chapters that don’t have them and help chapters get started. It might have the benefit of attracting new members by having a web present for chapters. Also, providing national assistance in creating chapter Facebook pages could be helpful.

3. Require every chapter and regional directors to provide copies of bank statements, with account numbers redacted, in their annual reports, starting this spring. Require chapter presidents to sign that they have looked through the statements and assure the spending is appropriate to the best of their knowledge. Assign staff and a national-level committee to review annual reports to glean great ideas for an annual summary of Great Ideas for Chapter Activities and to flag questions for further inquiry by regional directors (or the secretary-treasurer?). Financial report summaries are insufficient – we have found it’s too easy for people to make things up. When actual bank statements are required to be provided then it is much more difficult to hide shenanigans – or be tempted.

4. Survey chapter leaders via SurveyMonkey to ask them their thoughts and feedback for a) what they already do regarding these practices, b) whether they would implement any of these particular practices, and c) their feelings about the openness plan elements. Could include some other questions for them as well, relevant to the organization.

5. Schedule a session at the national convention in Anaheim to allow chapter leaders to discuss the best practices, share their experiences, and provide recommendations and suggestions. Would need to do that in the next few weeks while the programming committee is at work. Perhaps leave a spot that could be used for that or another topic as a backup.
6. Institute practices at the national level to demonstrate to members and the public that the organization is committed to openness. In addition to bylaws and meeting minutes, at the main SPJ website post the following documents: articles of incorporation, IRS Form 990, audited financial reports, each year’s budget as a spreadsheet, conflict-of-interest policy, whistleblower policy (this wouldn’t be ground-breaking – for example, all of these documents are posted for members and the public at IRE’s website, http://www.ire.org/about/legal-documents/).

7. Draft a resolution for the national convention in Anaheim regarding transparency, reinforcing our commitment to holding our government and ourselves accountable for the good of society.

Conclusion

    Again, all of these are just ideas. There are no doubt problems and issues that need further discussion, and perhaps we are already doing some of these things, but it’s something to serve as a base starting position. I look forward to the discussion April 20!

Supplement:

Openness and Accountability Best Practices Guide (draft)

    The Society of Professional Journalists and its professional and student chapters are not government entities, but members believe in the strongest principles of transparency — the business of the people should be done before the people, inviting the people to participate. The following guidelines provide tips and recommendations for fostering openness and accountability at the local, regional and national levels of the society.

MEETINGS

    SPJ meetings at the local and national level should follow the spirit of state sunshine laws (for a good description of open meeting law elements, see www.rcfp.org/ogg). Leaders should:
    - Post meeting time, date, and place information in advance for members, prospective members, and the public, on a website, Facebook page, email or other accessible venues.
    - Include agenda items in meeting agendas to increase meeting attendance and attract potential new members. Members should contact the president at least a two days in advance of the meeting if they would like to request a topic for the agenda.
    - Allow anyone from the membership or public to observe the meeting. Provide an open comment period to let people chime in.
    - Post meeting minutes at a chapter website promptly, preferably within five business days of the meeting, so members can keep abreast of chapter activities. Include any decisions or votes.
    - Make meetings accessible, both physically and electronically. Meetings should be held where people are welcome to attend and can easily access. Consider
GoToMeeting or other electronic means of broadcasting meetings and allowing participation for those cannot get to the meeting, but are interested in what happens.

- Account for circumstances where private discussion among leaders is necessary, similar to state open meeting laws. For example, typical exemptions that might allow meeting in "executive session" include considering/debating the qualifications of new leader appointees, rent negotiations for space, pending/potential litigation, etc. If board members do discuss matters in executive session, they should come out and make any decisions and votes publicly.

**RECORDS AND COMMUNICATIONS**

Society records and communications should be as open as possible to foster understanding, trust and efficiency. In general, just like meetings, apply the gist of state public record laws to SPJ functions, at least in spirit if not in letter.

- Make available online, if possible, and in a publicly available binder, governance documents, including bylaws, policies, annual IRS 990 forms, annual budget summaries, meeting minutes, and reports. This has the added benefit of saving institutional knowledge to be more easily passed along to new members/leaders.
- Follow the "Finances: Best Practices" recommendations at http://www.spj.org/chapter-best-practices.asp to prevent fraud within the organization. Provide a monthly financial report, budget, annual report and other financial information to members and the public. For extra transparency, member trust, and a barrier to malfeasance, post bank statements online as pdfs, with account numbers redacted, monthly, quarterly, or annually. If not feasible, allow members or the public to view chapter financial records by appointment.
- Provide a public forum for members to share information, discuss issues and network, such as a chapter WordPress blog, Facebook page, Twitter, or other social media venue. Use third-party software to annually archive the content of those online resources and save to a computer and binder (e.g., TwInBox, Twetake, SocialSafe, Cloudpreservation).
- Respond promptly, ideally within two business days, to any request from the media or public regarding the chapter. Provide national headquarters and other relevant leaders a heads up when SPJ might make the news. See SPJ's Social Media Guidelines for more tips about public communication as an SPJ leader.
- Assume that chapter email communications could be made available publicly, either through leaks, inadvertent "cc’s” or even through state public record requests (some members and leaders are government employees and subject to public record laws, even when using their private emails). If you absolutely don't want something spread through email, then it's best to pick up the phone.
- Account for circumstances where society records and communications should be kept secret for legitimate reasons, such as personnel, potential litigation, etc. Redact exempt information if need be, such as bank account numbers and dates of birth.
- Openly disclose any potential, real or perceived conflicts of interest of chapter leaders. Document in publicly accessible documents, such as meeting minutes, to demonstrate that leaders, chapters, and the society are not hiding anything.
MEMORANDUM

DATE: Jan. 7, 2013
FROM: Brandon Ballenger
SUBJ: Digital Communication Task Force
FOR: Sonny Albarado

OVERVIEW
After the Excellence in Journalism 2012 conference, as the newly installed president you called for a small task force to tackle two things: to develop digital communication guidelines for SPJ leaders, and to address a number of specific questions stemming from previous discussions and disputes.

The taskers included chapter coordinator Tara Puckey, director-at-large Carl Corry, and pro members James Pilcher, Victoria Reitano and myself. SPJ’s director of education Scott Leadingham also offered some guidance and opinions early in the process.

Our recommendations follow, beginning with our responses to the specific questions you raised and moving on to our proposals for communication best practices during fact-finding missions and for SPJ’s use of social media. The group has also collected a number of social media training and informational resources which we intend to share in some form through SPJ’s website. We hope our work proves useful for advancing SPJ’s efforts in the new year.

APPROACHES TO SPJ’S DIGITAL COMMUNICATION Q&A
When should regional directors and committee chairs inform the president about a planned blog post?
It’s a common-sense courtesy to inform the president if the post is about an issue of national relevance, and particularly if it’s critical of the organization in some way.

Likewise, if a president’s blog post is relevant to a region or a particular region or committee’s expertise, it makes sense to notify them. They may wish to comment on their own blogs.

Prior review of posts is unnecessary, and a poor idea; we should trust our leaders to do their jobs until they give us reason not to. Those who wish to be immediately notified of published posts can subscribe to the blogs’ RSS feeds.

Do chapter leaders or national leaders need to place disclaimers on any communication that they don’t speak for all of SPJ?
In most cases, it should be self-evident that views belong to a specific person and are not representative of SPJ. However, in instances where leaders are publishing on SPJ-branded platforms, clarity is worth the extra step. Photos, bios, and even expressly stating that “I speak for myself” all help.

Where limited space is a concern – as in a Twitter bio – a link to a catch-all disclaimer should suffice. (SPJ could create its own.)
Are committee blogs solely informative or can committee chairs also express opinions? Opinions create conversations. Committees should be free to express opinions, so long as it’s clear they are – either of the committee, or of its individual members – and are not postured as representing any larger group.

It makes little sense to limit blogs to disseminating information. A blog is an open-ended platform, no different than the pages of a newspaper, which can feature everything from news to analysis to op-eds and the funny pages.

Blogs are used in a variety of ways and have neither the constraints nor expectations of Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and other newer, narrower platforms. Their postings are not as ephemeral as some social media – for instance, it’s fairly easy to relocate an old post, and if people know to check they are not likely to miss the message. A blog also allows for discussion not restricted to a group of “friends” or “followers” – it is public and highly visible. It allows for a back-and-forth conversations.

If there is any expectation associated with blogs anymore, it’s probably that their posts are longer than on other social media. That makes blogs a better place for social media, where time for reflection and a more thorough expression of an idea are allowed.

Should the regional directors express opinions about news events or SPJ issues on their SPJ-hosted blogs or only use them to inform and communicate with members in their regions? Regional directors should be free to comment on reported events, as well as independently gather facts about newsworthy situations in their region and discuss them publicly. They should also be entitled to their opinions, but label them clearly and emphasize facts. Basic journalistic standards still apply – authors should seek comment from and fairly represent all sides of a story.

In situations where original reporting or research is required, directors should:

- Immediately let the public know they are aware of a situation and are on the job.
- Be an ongoing source for reliable information. Provide updates about progress using social media and other tools. Do the reporting that will lead to an official SPJ position, while sharing facts as they become available.
- If asked to investigate such situations, directors should report back before taking an official position.
- State the position as quickly as possible – be thorough, but also timely and relevant.

In a digital age, advocacy efforts can no longer take the form of a private fact-finding mission and a mailed letter kept private until its recipient acknowledges receipt. Journalists are not gatekeepers; they are scouts and heralds. The public, not institutions, drive change.

Are blogs even the best way for RDs to communicate with chapter leaders or others?
They can be, if RDs commit to updating them. Ideally, directors will communicate information in the way readers tend to consume it. But also ideally, users will move beyond their comfort zone and learn to use mediums where the information is most usefully and easily shared.

There’s no one right way to communicate; there are many options and the medium is only relevant given a specific purpose. For one as broad as “communicate information,” it makes little difference whether you email, blog, tweet or Facebook as long as everybody uses that platform and is comfortable with it.

Each region should have its own social media accounts, including a blog. These should be networked together in some fashion for potential cross-pollination. But interaction and a commitment to updating the community is the key.

FACT-FINDING PROPOSAL
If it is to remain a relevant voice in the fight for First Amendment rights, the Society of Professional Journalists needs a modern, standardized approach to the way it conducts fact-finding missions and releases official statements.

As recent history has made clear, SPJ’s lack of a concrete plan for how to attack free speech controversies has left open the opportunity for miscommunication. And it has prevented the organization from communicating efficiently and effectively beyond traditional means.

In some cases, that has resulted in the Society coming out with positions long after a controversy is over. As a result, we lose credence as a go-to source for such matters.

Most recently, this lack of clarity resulted in a public argument between two national officers over how SPJ should have responded to a controversy involving The Red and Black student publication at the University of Georgia, in which editors of the publication walked out to protest censorship.

In August 2012, SPJ President John Ensslin asked Region 3 Director Michael Koretzky to conduct a fact-finding mission on the issue. After Koretzky assigned someone to visit the school, he wrote about his findings and conclusions on the Region 3 blog, Southern Drawl, without talking to Ensslin first.

Ensslin said he felt blind-sided and ordered Koretzky to remove the post. Koretzky did take down the post, but criticized Ensslin’s directive.

Part of the problem was that Ensslin expected Koretzky to report back to him before making any comments on the matter, but did not explicitly say so, leaving room for interpretation on how Koretzky should proceed. Koretzky felt he had the authority to move ahead without Ensslin’s sign-off, and was concerned that the organization would drag out stating its position. He also wanted to make sure SPJ served as a leader on the issue as it progressed.

Following that incident, SPJ President Sonny Albarado tasked this working group to propose guidelines on how to handle similar situations in the future.
To be clear, only the President, or someone designated by the President, can officially speak on behalf of SPJ.

That said, here are our suggestions:

- Before SPJ as an organization can release an official opinion on an event or controversy, it must perform due diligence and gather facts. Journalistic standards should be followed, with all sides in a matter provided an opportunity to tell their stories and respond to accusations. However, SPJ should issue an initial statement acknowledging the issue, its potential implications and state the Society’s planned response and its goals.
- The President will appoint investigators; reasonable travel expenses by investigators should be reimbursed by the Society.
- SPJ officers and national committee members should refrain from issuing unqualified opinions until an official statement is stated by the organization.
- During the investigative process, SPJ should frequently update its members and the public about the investigation’s progress using any means available, including blogs and social platforms. These updates should not express opinions, but provide information and observations. Essentially, investigators must act as objective journalists. What types of things can be shared? News and research from other sources and on-the-record interviews. Investigators may use their own accounts so long as it doesn’t go against their company’s social media policy. They may also use a designated SPJ account.
- SPJ may also provide forums for discussion, asking for the public’s input, fostering conversations and engaging with interested parties.
- A complete report with findings and recommendations must be submitted to the president for review.
- An official SPJ statement is issued via a press release on spj.org and shared in all appropriate platforms, including, but not limited to, email, social media, blogs and taped or live audio and video.

This process may take hours, or it may take days, depending upon the complexity of the situation.

**PROPOSED SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY**

**Scope**

This proposal is for members of SPJ’s national board and headquarters staff. This will cover not only the organization’s social media efforts, but how individual members should use social media when discussing SPJ.

This set of guidelines comes after a thorough review of best practices from governmental agencies, non-profit organizations and some of the nation’s largest businesses.

All of those policies can be summed up with two basic words: Common Sense.

So here are the guidelines ...
Disclosure
When discussing SPJ business on social media platforms, SPJ leaders and staffers need to disclose their position with SPJ or have that clearly indicated in their profile description.

The SPJ main website also needs a page that explains how the organization uses social media, its social media guidelines and what platforms it operates on.

This can branch off into more discussion and instruction on how journalism and social media now go hand in hand, and how chapters and local SPJ leaders can use the medium to leverage social media to spread the word about events, news and the overall mission of the organization.

But there needs to be a place where SPJ’s social media policy is explained for all members to see.

Content
Since SPJ is an advocate of free speech, this section is not going to mandate what can and can’t be said by organization leaders and employees on social media platforms about SPJ. But use common sense, and be sure to state that you are speaking on your own and not on behalf of the organization when discussing SPJ issues. In the case of Twitter, just disclosing this in your profile description should be enough.

Many say in their own profile that their tweets, blogs and Facebook posts are their own and do not represent the position of SPJ. However, these should be on personal accounts: anyone using an official SPJ account or blog (including regional blogs) should follow the guidelines listed below.

Content guidelines
- Any messages regarding SPJ policy or conveying news about the national organization or a position from the national organization need to come from official SPJ channels (Twitter account, Facebook page, LinkedIn page, etc.) and from the president/executive director FIRST. Anything else makes it appear as a usurping of authority from organization leadership.

- This is a situation-dependent guideline. If the leader in question is a Regional Director and the situation does not involve national leadership, they would probably be able to review the content themselves. If it involved national leadership or headquarters, however, the content should be reviewed by national staff or the SPJ president. This includes regional and national blogs, regional and national Twitter accounts and Facebook pages, etc.

- Individual SPJ leaders and staff should use common sense when discussing the organization’s business. Do not disparage SPJ or its members or individuals; do not disclose private or proprietary information; encourage discussion and discourse about SPJ and journalism in general.
Live Events

- When it comes to live, ongoing events, such as open board meetings, and convention business, all members of SPJ's board and staff are allowed to "live tweet." Again, common sense is the key here. A guideline would be to inform followers as to what the news is, instead of imparting an individual opinion.

- Anyone who attends a meeting during which SPJ business is conducted also is free to fully report on that meeting through word of mouth, social media and other means. The discussions and information distributed at those meetings may flow freely.

Conclusion

This is just a guideline and not a policy. There are no punishments or sanctions involved. And as an organization, SPJ is in a position to ENCOURAGE the use of social media by all members and as a tool for reaching our members.

After all, SPJ is primarily a volunteer-run nonprofit organization that holds the concept of free speech as one of its core tenets.

But we also need to keep the organization's best interests at heart when discussing SPJ business and any time when SPJ is involved. So use prudence and common sense, and always disclose affiliation and background whenever possible.