

# Ethical News

The newsletter of the AEJMC  
Media Ethics Division

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**SAN ANTONIO!**  
MED program  
on page 5

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## Spokane editor has 'the best interests of citizens in mind'

Earlier this year, the *Spokane, Wash.*, *Spokesman-Review* conducted an investigation into allegations that Spokane Mayor Jim West was using the Internet to solicit sexual liaisons with minors. Here is the newspaper editor's account of that investigation. Below, MED member William Babcock of California State, Long Beach responds.

**Steven A. Smith, editor,  
The Spokesman-Review**

When reporter Bill Morlin first recommended *The Spokesman-Review* hire an outside expert to help with our investigation of Spokane Mayor Jim West, I said no.

Morlin had been investigating rumors that West sexually abused young boys while he was a deputy

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sheriff in the late 1970s and early '80s. That investigation had begun in the summer of 2003, when West was a state legislator, and developed into a classic shoe-leather project. Without the names of potential victims, dates or accounts of specific incidents, Morlin was

knocking on doors, making blind phone calls, visiting shelters and rehab facilities trying to track down men who had dropped out of society, perhaps as a result of abuse they suffered as children.

It was in the fall of 2004 that Morlin stumbled across an unex-

pected and startling new angle. While looking for a possible victim from 25 years ago, a source pointed Morlin to an 18-year-old man who had told friends he recently met West, now Spokane's mayor, in an online chat room, had gone on a date with him and engaged in consensual sex.

Morlin tracked down the young man and listened to his story. The youth said he had chatted with an older man on the Web site Gay.com. The man used the screen name "Cobra82nd." His online profile was relatively vague, offering no substantial clues to the man's identity. The accompanying photo, instead of a head shot, was a Chamber of Commerce-type picture of the Spokane Falls.

The young man told Morlin he had finally agreed to meet Cobra82nd in June 2004, the lure being an offer to let the younger man, a self-described car nut, drive

See MAYOR, page 3

## Frustrating investigations don't have to lead to deception

**William A. Babcock  
California State University,  
Long Beach**

A daily newspaper must clear a high ethics bar whenever it contemplates using deceptive news-gathering techniques. But when the prey is a mayor believed to be acting inappropriately with young men, there is a great temptation to best position the ends to justify the means, and thus let the ethics bar

slide down a rung or two.

Being deceptively means knowingly telling a lie, whether by leaving a person with a false impression, omitting certain facts, telling a whopper, etc. That there was "explosive material" in what was alleged about the mayor does not justify lying.

Is it the role of the media  
to in effect play junior G-men  
so that they can  
get their man?

It seems that *Spokesman-Review* Editor Steve Smith and reporter Bill Morlin had become frustrated that they were unable to nail the mayor after months of close-but-no-cigar searching.

Just how far should news organization go to obtain a "smoking gun?" *The Spokesman-Review*

determined that the mayor's alleged crime justified entrapment, and as a result hired a former federal agent to "draw our target out." But is it the role of the media to in effect play junior G-men so that they can get their man?

Smith invokes the SPJ code of ethics, saying its "guidelines say deception may be appropriate if editors determine the story is of critical public importance and if they conclude there is absolutely

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# Mainstream journos can reclaim prominence

**Erik Ugland**  
Vice chair/program head

As excited as most journalism educators are by the evolution of communication technology, many of us are equally dismayed by the concomitant decline in people's respect for traditional journalistic values.

The most precious of these, and the one that appears to be in the greatest jeopardy, is the value of neutrality, or, dare I say it, objectivity.

The ascendance of the Web as a news venue and the ubiquity of Blogs have helped to democratize the newsgathering and disseminating process, putting more control in the hands of the non-credentialed masses. But they have also established a world that is bloated with falsehood, conjecture and partisan rancor.

This ubiquity of one-sided "news" would be tolerable if it were a simple sideshow – a free-wheeling and whimsical alternative to the staid, reliable, mainstream news media. But we all know that traditional news has become infected with a strain of the same virus.

Aside from the news media's well-chronicled embrace of the lowest common denominator, its neutrality has also grown less clear, with more news analyses in our newspapers, more half-baked commentaries on our newscasts and an unrelenting cacophony of talkshow jabber on our cable news channels.

Even worse is that the public – particularly younger people – perceive the mainstream news media as being even more biased than they actually are, to the point where they see no reason to assume that blogs are any less reliable than the nightly news. All media are biased, the thinking seems to go, so why read the *Wall Street Journal* when you can read the *Drudge Report* and *Daily Kos* and be just as well-informed and just as proximate to the truth?

We are quickly becoming a society in which people either tune the news out completely, or attend only to those stories that comport with their preexisting assumptions. And the growing perception (often at odds with reality) is that news organizations can now readily be defined by the same, simplistic Red-Blue template that has come to define our politics.

Can this trend be reversed, or will the atrophy of journalistic values continue?

I am not sure, but I am holding out hope for one potential savior: our old friend, the metropolitan daily newspaper.

Whatever failures continue to be exhibited by the mainstream news media, the Web sites and the blogs, they will be less concerning if every major city has a daily newspaper that is a trusted

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voice – a reliable locus of pure news, untouched by corporate overseers or partisan hustlers.

It would be nice if all mainstream media could experience an epiphany and chart a new course, but that is not realistic. Local broadcast news is a wretched mess that may be impossible to clean up. Cable television continues to be a 500-channel wasted opportunity. And even the national newspapers, which, for the most part, do excellent work, are so bound by traditions and so boxed in by their fixed identities that they might not be as capable of changing directions.

So, I am putting my faith in the metro dailies – *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *Des Moines Register*, the *Sacramento Bee*. Those types of organizations are in the best position to serve as our trusted custodians of the truth.

This will take a renewed commitment by newspaper leaders, however, and some important changes to the status quo. If they are to save us from our current crisis there are at least five things that the leaders of the metro dailies ought to consider:

## 1. Eliminate the Staff-Written Editorial

This might seem like a strange suggestion. What is more strange, however, is that the unsigned, staff-written editorial still occupies a space on the pages of nearly every newspaper in the country.

I believe that people's perceptions of newspaper bias are shaped more directly and more profoundly by the points of view expressed each day in the staff-written editorial than in anything they might encounter in the rest of the news hole. Indeed, the editorials almost certainly prime readers to perceive the rest of the paper as the product of an organization with an agenda.

Of course, readers are supposed to understand

that the editorials merely reflect the opinions of the editorial board, not the paper. But people do not understand this, and it is self-destructive to hold out hope that someday they will.

## 2. Reach Out

Metro dailies are still staffed largely by people who self-identify as liberal or left-leaning, and this imbalance needs to be corrected. It would be a disaster for newspapers to start pandering like MSNBC did when it hired Michael Savage, but it is still in the best interest of newspapers to diversify to the greatest extent possible, across a variety of measures, including political affiliation.

## 3. Market Themselves

Just because newspapers "build it" doesn't guarantee that readers will come. The leaders of the metro dailies need to be absolutely sold on the idea that their strength, their market advantage and their future lies in their ability to serve as determinedly dispassionate providers of news, and they need to sell the public on that notion.

## 4. Fight for Independence

Nothing has been more destructive to the integrity of news than the consolidation of media ownership. Resisting the corrupting interferences that consolidation and conglomeration breed is easier said than done.

But our democracy depends on independent media, and nothing would be more empowering than if a few metro dailies were able to extract themselves from corporate control and reassert their independence. Even better would be a complete detachment and the creation of a cohort of news organizations whose profit goal is to simply break even.

## 5. Continue to Innovate

Metro dailies must continue to take advantage of new technologies and find new ways to reach their readers. Dedication to "old journalism" does not require a commitment to old media. Nevertheless, it is ultimately the integrity of the news that metro dailies provide, not the technology that they employ, that will determine their fate.

It is impossible to predict which direction news organizations will ultimately go in the next decade, but many of us believe that at some point the public will grow weary of the partisans, the panderers and the carnival-barkers and they will appreciate once again the virtues of the by-the-book journalism that metro dailies have traditionally provided.

## Spokane editor has 'the best interests of citizens in mind'

MAYOR, from page 1

a brand-new Lexus convertible. They met at a local Applebee's restaurant (the 18-year-old paid) and went for a drive. A short time later, they parked behind a local country club and had consensual sex.

That's the story Morlin brought to Managing Editor Gary Graham and me in the fall of 2004, shortly after his interview with the youth but several months after the "date." The young man had no proof to support his story. During the tryst, he said, the man identified himself as West. But the young man said he had not recognized the mayor when they met.

Although the young man had no proof, there were pieces of the story that seemed credible. For one thing, Mayor West had a relatively new Lexus convertible. As a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne, West flew in Cobra helicopters, which could have led to the screen name Cobra82nd. Furthermore, our inquiries into the mayor's past had uncovered patterns of behavior that would be consistent with online "cruising." The young man described classic predatory grooming behavior that included the offering of gifts and benefits – culminating in the offer to drive the Lexus. And his story suggested that the mayor might even be seeking trysts with underage youngsters. Our source, after all, was barely 18.

All of this was explosive material. Regardless of what our investigation into past abuse might produce, the current online activity was a compelling, recent story built around conduct that very well could be illegal, conduct that could threaten the well-being of young people in our

community and compromise the mayor's office.

But I didn't believe it. It didn't seem possible to me that our mayor, one of the state's savviest politicians, would jeopardize his future with reckless online activity. What if the young man's "date" was a poseur pretending to be West to impress the youth? All we had to go on was a story told by a confused 18-year-old who hadn't even recognized the man he was with as the mayor.

I told Morlin there could be no story unless we had absolute and unqualified proof that the man behind Cobra82nd was Mayor Jim West. Absent that proof, we'd spike that element of our investigation.

To prove Cobra82nd's identity, we had multiple options:

We could go ask the mayor. That didn't seem very smart. We'd get a simple denial, and Cobra82nd would drop off the Web site. No story;

We could ask the young man to go back into Gay.com and resume his conversations with the older man. And he agreed to do that, although reluctantly. But our source's resumed communi-

The guidelines say deception may be appropriate if editors determine the story is of critical public importance and if they conclude there is absolutely no other way to obtain the information. We understood clearly that the answers to both questions are judgment calls. Reasonable people examining the same set of facts might make different decisions.

cation (with the older man now using the screen name RightBiGuy) was not conclusive. And the young man didn't want to continue.

We discussed finding another young man, a real person, to go into Gay.com and seek out our target. But that didn't seem ethically sound.

We discussed the possibility of Morlin going online. But if he did so as a reporter, the mayor would disappear. And if he posed as a young person, he would be engaging in a deception we still hoped to avoid.

Going to Gay.com management and seeking its assistance was not possible. Absent a court order from law enforcement, the company would adhere to its appropriately stringent privacy standards.

In the end, Morlin came to me with the proposal we hire an outside consultant, a forensic computer expert, to enter Gay.com chat rooms and "lurk" in hopes of intercepting communication between RightBiGuy, Cobra82nd and chat room occupants. Such an interception might allow us to trace the targeted screen names back

*continued on next page*

## Frustrating investigations don't have to lead to deception

FRUSTRATION, from page 1

no other way to obtain the information." It appears as if the *Spokesman-Review* editors' frustration at their inability to get the goods on West may have caused them to overstate the importance of the story as a means of justifying deception.

In the final analysis, I remain unconvinced that the story of West's online activity, if confirmed, was of such significant public importance that it justified deception. Smith says that while one might challenge his newspaper's judgment, "charging us with unethical conduct is wrong. We did what we did in pursuit of the truth and in conformance with the standards of

The craft of journalism has suffered too many blows in recent years to its credibility for it to afford to make bad decisions.

our craft."

Evoking "pursuit of the truth" in this instance is akin to Richard Nixon's pulling the "national security" card during Watergate. And if Smith knew that he'd "take heat from within the profession," can he at the same time claim that he

acted "in conformance with the standards of our craft?"

Smith says that his first reaction was to not hire an outside expert to help The *Spokesman-Review* reporter Bill Morlin investigate Spokane Mayor Jim West, and that he hoped to avoid deception. While ethics decision-making means going beyond one's initial impression, one should not be overly quick to dismiss a gut reaction even when the scent of a hot story is strong. The craft of journalism has suffered too many blows in recent years to its credibility for it to afford to make bad decisions.

In the end, Spokane may be well served to have West's alleged activities exposed. But was the cost to journalism ethics worth the price?

— continued from previous page —

to a particular ISP, a specific computer, maybe even an office.

With some reluctance, Graham and I agreed to that step, on condition our expert not know in advance our target's suspected true name.

But by the beginning of 2005, we had learned that Gay.com firewalls and filters made technical tracking impossible. There was no way to get what we needed by lurking.

Our consultant, a former federal agent with experience in tracking online pornography and sexual predators, said the only way to obtain the proof we needed was to go into Gay.com as a young person and draw our target out until he provided proof of identity himself or moved his communication into an arena where tracking would be possible, such as AOL Instant Messaging.

The scenario was deceptive on its face, presenting me, the managing and city editors and reporter Morlin with an agonizing choice.

We understood we were entering into a gray area. The Society of Professional Journalists code of ethics, for example, recognizes that deception may be appropriate under certain extraordinary conditions. Our internal code, based on SPJ's, uses similar language. But, as a common practice, we understood clearly that our deception would be frowned upon by many in our industry and condemned by some.

The guidelines say deception may be appropriate if editors determine the story is of critical public importance and if they conclude there is absolutely no other way to obtain the information. We understood clearly that the answers to both questions are judgment calls. Reasonable people examining the same set of facts might make different decisions.

Before authorizing the deception, we walked through the looming minefield. We re-examined the nature of our investigation and the relationship of the Internet component to the whole. Was the story of Mayor West's online activity, if confirmed, of significant public importance? We decided it was.

Next, we once again reviewed other options for obtaining the information. No option of which we were aware then, and no option suggested since, would have provided conclusive proof given the circumstances.

I posed our situation to trusted colleagues, editors at other metros, who agreed deception was the appropriate course. Later, Graham consulted with an ethicist at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies who, after applying that institution's six-point check list on deceptive practices, concluded we were following an appropriate course, particularly because our goal was to confirm behavior we had every reason to believe was occurring, not to create new or unusual behavior.

So I made the decision to use the consultant. Morlin and city editor Carla Savalli met with him and established the ground rules.

The consultant was asked to do two things.

The screenshot shows a news article from the Spokesman-Review. The main headline is "West tied to sex abuse in '70s, using office to lure young men". Below the headline is a sub-headline: "Allegations shadow politician throughout his career". There is a small portrait of a man, presumably Mayor West, to the right of the text. The article text is partially visible, mentioning "For a quarter century, the man who is now Spokane's mayor has used positions of public trust... to develop sexual relationships with boys and young men." and "One that landed in a court deposition: But Jim West evaded him in the mid-'70s when he was a lawyer and West was a Spokane County sheriff's deputy and Boy Scout leader. A second sex abuse accusation: West of sexual abuse during the same era, including an incident at Camp Coates, a Boy Scout camp on Diamond Lake." The article is attributed to Bill Morlin, a staff writer.

To read the Spokesman-Review's investigation, continuing coverage, comments from readers, and other related documents, go to [www.spokesman-review.com/jimwest](http://www.spokesman-review.com/jimwest).

First, to find out who really was behind Cobra82nd and RightBiGuy, and, second, to determine whether that person would approach and solicit an underage youngster or would confine his behavior to someone 18 or older.

We told the consultant to set up his profile and "hang around" the chat rooms but not initiate contact or initiate any escalation in behavior. We were adamant that our target must take the lead.

The consultant insisted, and we agreed, that he would report clearly illegal activity directly to police.

In the newsroom, we also agreed to reveal our ruse to readers, regardless of whether it produced publishable information. We understood transparency would be crucial to our credibility no matter what the investigation's outcome.

The ruse was launched in early 2005 and lasted not quite three months. It took weeks for RightBiGuy to make contact, begin online meetings and gain the confidence to begin revealing more clues to his identity.

Evidence pointing to Jim West as the man behind the screen names certainly mounted. But "maybe" and "probably" were not good enough. Out of fairness to the mayor, if for no other reason, we had to be absolutely certain.

RightBiGuy did initiate contact with our character, Moto-Brock, whom he believed to be a 17-year-old, male high school senior. And the older man did move the conversation toward sex while our fictional student was still 17. But there was no indication he would go beyond that until our character approached his 18th birthday.

At that point, RightBiGuy began offering birthday gifts and suggested he could help Moto-Brock with introductions to important people and provide him with tickets to sporting events. Eventually, he offered the youth, whom he had never met, an internship in his office.

As soon as Moto-Brock turned 18, RightBiGuy turned the conversation to cybersex.

It wasn't until April 9 that he provided Moto-Brock with real evidence of his identity, using his City Hall e-mail address to send our fictional student a picture of himself. And because he was outside Gay.com, our consultant was able to capture the ISP address, not immediately useful absent a court order, but helpful if we ever faced litigation.

Further, the mayor set up a meeting with Moto-Brock for the next morning. *Spokesman-Review* journalists and the consultant were present to watch the mayor arrive for the meeting, for which Moto-Brock never arrived. It was the final, conclusive piece of evidence.

At that point, we terminated Moto-Brock, though the mayor continued his pursuit for the rest of April, even continuing to offer the internship.

Eventually confronted with our evidence, the mayor had to acknowledge his online behavior. With allegations of past abuse well beyond the statute of limitations, the online activity poses the greatest challenge to Jim West's future. He is being investigated by the FBI for possible abuse of his office in violation of federal law. As I write this, state and local authorities are trying to determine how a state investigation might be mounted given the mayor's close ties to the criminal justice system at nearly all levels.

In the community, cries for his resignation have been pervasive, but the mayor, thus far, has refused to leave office. He cannot be fired by the City Council, though a commission has been appointed to investigate his online activities. A group of Spokane residents who want to petition for his ouster recently cleared one legal hurdle, but recall backers face the prospect of additional court challenges before they can begin collecting petition signatures later this year.

Looking back, I have no second thoughts about our actions. Those who argue deception is never appropriate in the pursuit of a story deny long-standing traditions of the craft and fail to recognize that our codes of ethics provide for such deception when circumstances warrant. Critics can challenge our judgment calls, but charging us with unethical conduct is wrong.

We did what we did in pursuit of the truth and in conformance with the standards of our craft. Our reporting was accurate. It was fair. And it may produce needed change in local government. I believe our investigation was undertaken with the best interests of citizens in mind, knowing we'd take heat from within the profession. We can live with that.



Media Ethics Division program  
August 10-13, 2005  
San Antonio, Texas

## WEDNESDAY

8:15 a.m. to 9:45 a.m.

*Media Ethics and Law Divisions Research Panel Session: Anonymous Voices in the Marketplace of Ideas*

**Moderating/Presiding:** Karla Gower, Alabama

**Panelists:** Sandra Chance, Florida  
Kathy Fitzpatrick, DePaul  
Lee Wilkins, Missouri

1:30 p.m. to 3 p.m.

*Media Ethics Division Refereed Paper Research Session: Ethics and Politics: Exploring Issues in Ads, Campaigns and Coverage*

**Moderating/Presiding:** Bill Reader, Ohio

◆ *An Appeal to Newspaper Authority in Television Political Ads: A Case Study*

Chris Roberts, South Carolina

◆ *Black Eye: The Ethics of CBS News and The National Guard Documents*

Elizabeth Blanks Hindman, Washington State

◆ *Ideal Journalism: An Analysis of the Idaho Falls Post Register's Ideologies in Covering the 2002 Gubernatorial Campaign\**

Kris Boyle, Brigham Young

◆ *Bloggers Strike A Nerve: Examining the Intersection of Blogging and Journalism*

Bryan Murley and Kim Smith, South Carolina

**Discussant:** Elizabeth Skewes, Colorado

\* Winner, Carol Burnett/University of Hawaii/AEJMC Prize and top paper, media and politics special paper call.

3:15 p.m. to 4:45 p.m.

*Media Ethics, Public Relations, Advertising and Radio-Television Journalism Divisions Mini-plenary PF&R Panel Session: At the Intersection of Ethics and Politics: Questions and Controversies Raised By Campaign Advertising, News Coverage and Spin Doctoring*

**Moderating/Presiding:** Patrick Lee Plaisance,

Colorado State

**Panelists:** Marilyn Roberts, Florida  
Elizabeth Skewes, Colorado  
Ronnie Crocker, *Houston Chronicle*  
Mark Harmon, Tennessee  
Dean Kruckeberg, Northern Iowa

## THURSDAY

8:15 a.m. to 9:45 a.m.

*Media Ethics Division Refereed Paper Session: Media Ethics on the Digital Frontier*

**Moderating/Presiding:** Patrick Lee Plaisance, Colorado State

◆ *Minding The Gap: An Ethical Perspective on the Use of Weblogs in Journalistic Practice\**

Andrew Morozov, Washington State

◆ *Communitarian Ethics and the Electronic Village*  
Alisa White, Texas at Arlington

◆ *Interactivity and Prioritizing the Human: A Code of Blogging Ethics\*\**

Martin Kuhn, North Carolina at Chapel Hill

◆ *Blood on the Lens: "Private" Moments, Public Platforms: Images and Ethics Codes Across Media in an Era of Violence and Tragedy\*\*\**

Susan Keith, Rutgers, Carol B. Schwalbe and B. William Silcock, Arizona State

**Discussant:** Stephen Ward, British Columbia

\* Runner Up, Carol Burnett/University of Hawaii/AEJMC Prize

\*\* Winner, Professional Relevance Award

\*\*\* Second Place, Faculty Paper

11:45 a.m. to 1:15 p.m.

*Media Ethics and Public Relations Divisions PF&R Panel Session: What is Responsible Advocacy? Perspectives on Ethics in PR*

**Moderating/Presiding:** Kathy Fitzpatrick, DePaul

**Panelists:** Tom Bivins, Oregon  
Carolyn Bronstein, DePaul

Karla Gower, Alabama  
Larissa Grunig, Maryland  
Kirk Hallahan, Colorado State  
Robert Heath, Houston  
Linda Hon, Florida  
Michael Palenchar, Tennessee  
Elizabeth Toth, Maryland  
Don Wright, South Alabama

3:15 p.m. to 4:45 p.m.

*Media Ethics Division Refereed Paper Session: Stewardship and the Concept of Care*

**Moderating/Presiding:** Karon Speckman, Truman State

◆ *Civic Responsibility: A Casualty of Ethical Principle*

John C. Watson, American

◆ *Murder in Our Midst: Expanding Coverage to Include Care and Responsibility\**

Romayne Smith Fullerton, Western Ontario and Maggie Jones Patterson, Duquesne

◆ *This Little Piggy Went to Press: The Ethics of the American News Media's Construction of Animals in Agriculture From 2000 to 2003*

Carrie Packwood Freeman, Oregon

◆ *A Failure of Imagination: The 9/11 Commission, Terrorism Coverage and Media Responsibility*

Glen Feighery, Utah

**Discussant:** David Craig, Oklahoma

\* Top Faculty Paper

## FRIDAY

8:15 a.m. to 9:45 a.m.

*Public Relations and Media Ethics Divisions Teaching Panel Session: Ethics, Legal Issues, Expectations and Internship Management*

**Moderating/Presiding:** Lisa Fall, Tennessee

**Topics and Panelists:**

◆ *Students' Perceptions of On-The-Job Ethical Issues*

Pamela Bourland-Davis, Georgia Southern;

Charles A. Lubbers, South Dakota and Brad Rawlins, Brigham Young

◆ *Managing Supervisors' Expectations of Interns and Internships*

Patricia A. Curtin, North Carolina at Chapel Hill

◆ *Legal Considerations of Internships*  
Don Grady and Jessica Gisclair, Elon

◆ *Agency-Principal Obligations in Internships*  
Michael Parkinson, Texas Tech

**11:45 a.m. to 1:15 p.m.**

*Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Refereed Paper Research Session: Scholar-to-Scholar Media Ethics Division*

◆ 27. *A "Fool Satisfied"? Journalists and Mill's Principle of Utility*, Lee Ann Peck, Northern Colorado

◆ 28. *Codes And Codism: SPJ, RTNDA and NPPA Rewrite Their Codes of Ethics – Why, How and to What Effect?*, Dan Kozlowski, North Carolina

◆ 29. *Succulent Sins, Personalized Politics and Mainstream Media's Tabloidization Temptation*, Jenn Burleson Mackay, Alabama

◆ 30. *Can Professionalism Protect the Integrity of Journalism Against the Market?*, Sandra L. Borden, Western Michigan

**5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.**

*Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Interest Group and Media Ethics Division Teaching Panel Session: Voice to the Voiceless: GLBT and Disability Issues in News Coverage and Classrooms*

**Moderating/Presiding:** Genelle Belmas, California State, Fullerton

**Panelists:** David Adams, Indiana  
Chris Burnett, California State, Sacramento  
Paul Lester, California State, Fullerton

Lee Anne Peck, Northern Colorado

**6:45 p.m. to 8:15 p.m.**

*Media Ethics Division Business Session: Members' Meeting*

**Moderating/Presiding:** Kris Bunton, St. Thomas

*The 2005 Clifford G. Christians Ethics Research Award, sponsored by the Carl Couch Center for Social and Internet Research, will be presented to Professor Michael Bugeja, Iowa State University for his book, Interpersonal Divide: The Search for Community in a Technological Age.*

**SATURDAY**

**8:15 a.m. to 9:45 a.m.**

*Communication Theory and Methodology and Media Ethics Divisions Research Panel Session: Requiring Student Participation in Research Pools: Muddying the Waters*

**Moderating/Presiding:** Douglas Blanks Hindman, Washington State

**Panelists:** Nojin Kwak, Michigan  
Andrew Hayes, Ohio State  
Virginia Whitehouse, Whitworth  
Renita Coleman, Louisiana State

**10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.**

*Media Ethics and Communication Theory and Methodology Divisions PF&R Panel Session: Your 15 Minutes of Fame: The Academic's Role as Public Scholar*

**Moderating/Presiding:** Lee Wilkins, Missouri

**Panelists:** Bruce Pinkleton, Washington State  
Kris Bunton, St. Thomas

**11:45 a.m. to 1:15 p.m.**

*Advertising and Media Ethics Divisions PF&R Panel Session: Strange Bedfellows: The Role of Advertising and Public Relations in the War on Terrorism*

**Moderating/Presiding:** Jami A. Fullerton, Oklahoma State

**Panelists:** Cari L. Eggspuehler, Executive Director, Business for Diplomatic Action  
Alice Kendrick, Southern Methodist  
Sig Christenson, Military Writer, San Antonio Express-News  
David McLemore, Bureau Chief, San Antonio Bureau, Dallas Morning News

**Discussant:** John Breslin, Iona

**1:30 p.m. to 6 p.m.**

*Media Ethics Division Workshop Session: Visual Truth in the Marketplace of Ideas*

**Moderating/Presiding:** William A. Babcock, California State, Long Beach and Virginia Whitehouse, Whitworth

**Panelists:** William A. Babcock, California State, Long Beach  
Anita Baca, San Antonio Express-News  
Kenneth Irby, Poynter Institute  
Julianne Newton, Oregon  
Maggie Jones Patterson, Duquesne  
Virginia Whitehouse, Whitworth  
Lee Wilkins, Missouri



## Media ethics teaching workshop focuses on visual communication

The Media Ethics Division's annual workshop held during the AEJMC convention this year turns its attention to visuals.

"Visual Truth in the Marketplace of Ideas," and the Teaching Ethics "Boot Camp" are scheduled from 1:30 to 6:30 p.m. on Saturday, Aug.

13, the last day of the AEJMC convention in San Antonio, Texas.

The workshop frames the balancing of truth-telling and minimizing of harm through the lens of visual communications and photojournalism. The 3:45 to 6 p.m. portion of the program concentrates on the

teaching of media ethics and is for new teachers of media ethics and those considering teaching ethics.

This year's program is geared for all AEJMC members, and the fee for the entire program is \$50 (\$40 for graduate students). Checks should be made out to AEJMC; you

also can enroll in the workshop when you register for the AEJMC convention (look for the check box under "special programs").

For additional details see [www.aejmc.org](http://www.aejmc.org) or e-mail workshop coordinator Bill Babcock at [wbabcock@csulb.edu](mailto:wbabcock@csulb.edu).

## Avoid the 'nuclear option' and other shortcuts in language usage

**David Craig**  
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I've been thinking a lot recently about the ethics of journalistic word choice – especially the ethical implications of shorthand labels. Condensing issues, viewpoints and activities into one or two words helps streamline stories and ease headline writing. But clarity and nuance are often lost.

When I discussed this topic with newspaper editors and writers during the past year, some pointed to longstanding issues such as how to refer to different sides in the abortion debate, as well as to recent concerns such as whether and when to use the word "terrorist."

This spring, we have seen a new usage of an old phrase, the "nuclear option," a term that surfaced in discussion of the threatened change in U.S. Senate rules to ban filibustering over judicial nominations. Publications that used the term referred to it in a variety of ways – for example, in May 24 articles, "a drastic parliamentary maneuver dubbed the 'nuclear option'" (*Denver Post*), "the so-called nuclear option" (*Boston Globe*), or "what some have called the nuclear option" (*New York Times*).

As someone who edited wire copy during the

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last decade of the Cold War, I might be more sensitive than my young students to the implications of this term. Of course, the intent of those who used it was to convey that the rule change was something with potentially grave consequences. But a term this inflammatory presents ethical problems – and underlines the value of thinking about word choice in ethical terms.

One way to state the ethical problems with the term "nuclear option" is to say that it has a low truth value because:

◆ It is vague and therefore does little to clarify for readers or viewers the meaning of the choice under discussion.

◆ It is highly emotional – evoking images of fear, death and mushroom clouds rather than conveying insight about what the specific consequences of the rule change might have been.

◆ It conveys judgment, not substance. No choice of words is value-neutral – even avoiding a side is a value choice – but a straightforward description of the rule change would be less likely to derail people from considering the substance of the issue.

All told, the term does little to convey truth about the issue to the audience.

All of this underlines the ethical value of the descriptions of the rule change that journalists provided apart from labels. They convey more truth about the issue in a less loaded way.

Last fall I talked with Tim Lynch, the *Los Angeles Times*' senior foreign and national copy chief, about the use of the word "terrorist." He said editors had not banned the word but favored description of the activity in question, with the reader left to decide whether it was terrorism. That kind of approach makes sense for the "nuclear option": Focus on what the change would actually do. The term might be used sparingly in addition to description to show how the discussion was actually framed.

Editors on copy desks face these kinds of choices daily, and good editors weigh them carefully. But discussing these issues in explicitly ethical terms – in both the classroom and the newsroom – may foster more careful choices about if or when to use loaded terms such as "nuclear option" and why.

Send items for the next newsletter to Stephanie Craft ([crafts@missouri.edu](mailto:crafts@missouri.edu)).

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