



Newspapers In Education, Washington News Council and
Washington Journalism Education Association Present:

THE TAO OF JOURNALISM: TRANSPARENT, ACCOUNTABLE AND OPEN

Tao :: a Mandarin Chinese word meaning way, path, doctrine or principle.

Week 2

What Is “Accountable” Journalism?

The Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics (spj.org/ethicscode.asp) is the most widely accepted set of guidelines for journalists nationwide. It contains four sections:

1. Seek Truth and Report It
2. Minimize Harm
3. Act Independently
4. Be Accountable

The last section reads:

“Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other. Journalists should:

- Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.
- Encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media.
- Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.
- Expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media.
- Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.”

How Does the TAO Pledge Define Accountability?

The Pledge states: “If we get any facts wrong, we will admit that promptly and publicly. We will post/publish/print/podcast/broadcast a correction or at least a clarification. We will fully explain what happened to cause the error or mistake. We will do a follow-up story if that is appropriate, putting the original material in better context. We will apologize and promise to be more careful next time. We will show a little humility.”

What’s a Good Example of Media Accountability?

A few years ago, Steve Smith, then editor of The Spokesman-Review in Spokane, asked the Washington News Council to undertake an unprecedented project. He wanted the WNC to conduct an independent analysis of his newspaper’s coverage of the River Park Square redevelopment project in downtown Spokane. The newspaper had been widely criticized for its coverage, partly because the project’s owners were the Cowles family – which also owns The Spokesman-Review! The WNC spent more than a year on its investigation and produced “Reporting on Yourself,” a 50-page report with findings and recommendations. Smith not only printed the entire report in his newspaper, but also agreed to adopt most of the Council’s recommendations. This may be the most Transparent, Accountable and Open action that any newspaper has ever

taken anywhere. Copies of the report are available from the WNC, in print and online. It has been used as a case study in media-ethics classes nationwide.

“We needed somebody from the outside to review our coverage. I thought it just set the record straight.”
— Karen Dorn Steele, former investigative reporter,
The Spokesman-Review

What’s a Bad Example of Media Accountability?

In May 2012, the Washington News Council began receiving phone calls and emails about a series of “investigative reports” by KIRO7 TV’s Eyewitness News titled “Hands-On Janitor.” The stories alleged that a custodian at Leschi Elementary School had mistreated children at the school. However, the school’s principal, teachers, staff and many parents, plus the custodian’s union, contended that the stories were inaccurate, sensationalized, biased, inflammatory, unfair and even racist. They filed 16 formal written complaints with the News Council. The WNC notified KIRO and invited the station to attend a public hearing to answer questions about the stories. But KIRO refused to return phone calls, emails or letters, and boycotted the hearing. After a 3-hour hearing at Town Hall, broadcast statewide by TVW, the WNC voted to uphold the complaints. About 40 audience members also voted to uphold the complaints, as did dozens of citizens who voted online. Was KIRO7 accountable? Watch the hearing video on the WNC website at www.wanewscouncil.org and decide for yourself.

“There are precious few options when one finds themselves improperly maligned by the press. The Washington News Council serves a vital function in our area for such victims as well as a critical resource for news consumers.”
— Mike McBee, International Union of Operating Engineers,
Local 609

What New Movie Features the TAO Seal?

“Struck by Lightning,” a new motion picture written by “Glee” star Chris Colfer, opened in theaters in January 2013. Colfer plays the editor of his high-school newspaper, and the TAO of Journalism Seal is posted on the newsroom wall. Watch for it!

