

**NEWSPAPER ETHICS IN  
THE NEW CENTURY**



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*A Report to the  
American Society of  
Newspaper Editors*

EDITED BY  
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AMERICAN SOCIETY OF NEWSPAPER EDITORS  
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## INTRODUCTION

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When ASNE commissioned its 1982 study of newspaper ethics, its main goal was to improve the relationship between editors and their publishers in defining professional values. The close collaboration between Katharine Graham and Ben Bradlee as they handled the Washington Post's Watergate investigation was still fresh in memory. Not all publishers, that survey revealed, were as bold, socially conscious, or as trusting of their editor as Graham.

Today's concerns are more basic. As newspaper readership declines and news-editorial resources are depleted, new kinds of pressures on traditional ethical values are created. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that publishers are infringing on editors' territory as they strive to maintain traditional profit levels even as circulation declines. But the evidence in these pages by the 12 authors of this report suggests that the anecdotes are not representative. Editor autonomy has improved since the 1982 survey. Editor-publisher relationships are smoother. And there is little indication that the drive for profit has led to a general decline in ethical standards.

These conclusions are the product of my fall 2005 seminar on media analysis in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Rachel Davis Mersey assisted with the editing of this volume.

The original 1982 survey was funded by the John and Mary R. Markle foundation with field work by the Research Triangle Institute. The 2005 survey was funded by Paul McCreath and the James Franceschini Foundation with field work by FGI of Chapel Hill.

Both surveys used a sample selection procedure based on newspaper circulation. We used ABC data for member papers and the Editor & Publisher Yearbook for non-members to list all daily newspapers in the USA by their circulation. The probability of selection into

the sample was in proportion to circulation size. Thus the percentages reported reflect not the percent of editors or staff members who responded but the percent of total daily newspaper circulation that those editors and staffers represent. For example, a response from an editor of a 300,000 circulation paper is given 10 times the weight of one whose paper has 30,000 circulation. This procedure makes the data for 1982 and 2005 comparable and reflects the investigators' concern for the social effects of newspaper's moral values. This selection process yielded 566 newspapers. Another 32 were added for a data sharing project with the Readership Institute at Northwestern University and are not included in this analysis.

The top editors at each paper were identified by the ASNE staff. Newspaper staff members were chosen from the Editor & Publisher Yearbook, the membership list of the American Copy Editors Society, and page-one bylines obtained from the Internet. The identification and selection procedures were different in 1982 but not in a way that would be expected to influence the results. Exact wording of the questions is reproduced in the appendix to this report.

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire sent by mail with three follow-ups. The initial mailing to editors and staff members was on July 12, 2005, and the last counted response was received on Sept. 13, 2005. Response rate in the 2005 survey was 71 percent for editors and 64 percent for staff members—high for mail surveys, but not as high as the 1982 responses, which were 78 and 72 percent respectively. We take this as a sign that editors are much busier these days.

Philip Meyer  
Chapel Hill  
February 2006