**PUBLIC MEDIA**

**INTEGRITY PROJECT**

**Rights, Roles and**

**Responsibility**

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In 2012, Wisconsin was a deeply divided state. The governor faced a recall election, driven largely in response to legislation that limited the collective bargaining rights of public employees. At Wisconsin Public Television and Wisconsin Public Radio, people were stressed. As public employees, we were personally affected by the changes. And as news organizations, we were reporting on the recall.

With emotions running high in a charged atmosphere, it was essential that we maintained our public trust by holding to our bedrock principles and practices of editorial integrity.

That’s a given, right? Simple? Not quite as simple as we thought.

Rewind to 2006. We began work on ethics guidelines. At that point, we weren’t facing an immediate issue, but we knew something would come up, and wanted to be ready. As important, we wanted to make sure that people inside and outside the organization had a clear understanding of our principles and practices. Today, we have the excellent work of the Public Media Integrity project. But in 2006, that hadn’t yet started.

Our 2006 document (cribbed liberally from WGBH) was a good start, but by 2012 it needed a sharper focus on editorial integrity, and updating to include social media. Also, it didn’t sufficiently address a core issue: is every WPT/WPR employee governed under a single framework, or is there a difference between some staff and others?

In 2012, we struggled with two central themes: how to protect both our individual rights of expression – free speech – and our journalistic standards and “duty of care” for the organization that sustain our hard-earned public trust. Our staff was understandably divided given the personal nature of the circumstances and the natural complexity of these issues.

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For most journalists and development staff, it was a no-brainer: credibility isn’t about one or two individuals – it’s about all of us, the entire organization. We all have a responsibility to protect that, whatever our job title. Most – not all – senior managers felt the same way. But across the organization, it was equally clear to some staff that their rights didn’t get signed away when they joined Wisconsin Public Television or Radio.

But what happens if your folks are “liking” and commenting on Facebook pages dedicated to supporting public employees or boycotting businesses that donated to particular elected officials? Or, posting on Facebook when a polarizing public figure will visit your studios?  What happens if staff signed a recall petition – which unlike a vote is public record – and a political action group identifies and publishes the names and affiliations of petition signers? This happened in other organizations, including a local commercial TV talent and a judge who were publicly “outed” as petition signers.

Social media was at the center of the discussion. In 2006 it wasn’t important. In 2012 it was everywhere, dominating much of the discussion and blurring the lines between public and private in a very visible way. Most of our staff had personal Facebook pages, and many felt that was entirely their business. There were posts criticizing the governor, some clearly identifying the individual as WPT/WPR staff. When does private speech cross over to the public square? How deep into the organization does our duty of care reach?

We knew it was time to update and clarify our editorial policy. And, we knew it was time to engage key staff in wrestling these issues to the ground. This makes for better policy, more buy-in and a prominent sense of the importance of articulating and exhibiting our values. It’s front of mind when the fan hits the fan.

**Develop or revisit your**

**editorial integrity guidelines right now, before an urgent circumstance arises. Adopt or adapt the Public Media “Code of Integrity”** <http://pmintegrity.org>.

**Wisconsin’s**

**adaptation can be found at**

<http://pmintegrity.org/newguidelines.cfm>

We looked at policies from NPR, RTDNA, the New York Times, the public media integrity project and others. As you probably know, NPR states very clearly that they’re a journalistic organization, and therefore all staff is “editorial.” To us, that seemed like too high and restrictive a bar, and we ultimately decided to divide our staff into two groups: journalists, those who control content with public policy implications, those who deliver news on-air, those who publicly represent WPT/WPR, senior managers who report to the Directors of Wisconsin Public Television and Wisconsin Public Radio; and everyone else.

Parsing this took a bit more time (what about videographers? Directors? Graphic designers?) Senior staff looked at every position, and developed the groupings. (Rather than elaborate the process, I invite you to look at our process document: <http://pmintegrity.org/pm_docs/WisconsinEditorialIntegrityGuidanceProcess.pdf>

In the end, we had one relatively small group whose jobs were clearly editorial and senior managers whose work and responsibilities make them representatives of our neutrality and keepers of our credibility; and a much larger group who were encouraged to be mindful of the impact their actions and speech could have.

This immediately raised the question: What happens if you cross the line? What are the consequences? The answer was: it depends. The specifics make all the difference. If you’ve had this conversation in your shop, you know that in this conversation things can quickly go down a rabbit hole of hypothetical’s – which is why we created guidelines, with few strict policies. We can’t anticipate every possibility, but we can prepare for an inevitable set of decisions at work and beyond.

**Recognize this is a process.**

**A healthy organization encourages and sustains an active conversation about a broad range of ethical issues, including editorial integrity.**

*This “Thinking Integrity” essay comes from the Public Media Integrity Project, a joint initiative of the Station Resource Group and the Affinity Group Coalition, with support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.*Ultimately we ended up with two documents. The first applies to all staff, and covers ethics across a range of issues. The second relates specifically to editorial integrity. Both are written into our hiring letters. Staff is responsible for understanding and following the guidelines. And to a large extent, it’s not as much about rules and consequences as it is about awareness, attention, practice-making-perfect and developing good judgment.

In the end, we didn’t satisfy everyone on staff. It’s hard to argue against free speech. Leadership’s best response – protecting our ability to ensure free speech writ broadly – doesn’t have the same resonance. Our obligation as leaders of this organization, our duty of care, requires that we preserve the public trust. This does not transcend individual rights. But it does give us the responsibility to ensure that individual actions don’t jeopardize that trust. We all have a right to free speech. But we **choose** to work at Wisconsin Public Broadcasting. Sometimes, our individual rights are subordinate to our collective obligation. We have to remember why public broadcasting matters, and why we have to protect it.

Throughout, our staff demonstrated professionalism, but also acted with a passion and commitment to their ideals, the ideals that brought them to public television and radio and sustain them in their work. These sometimes enhanced, and sometimes clashed, with the station’s ethical guidelines.

A closing thought. As stations and as a system, we need to maintain a conversation to raise our collective awareness of these issues. If you have an editorial integrity policy in place, review it. If you don’t, start now, before something comes up. And there’s another reason to do it now: It will surface an important and invigorating dialogue with your staff. You will be a stronger organization, and when a difficult issue does arise, your staff will likely “do the right thing” because they have confidence in your leadership, and share a commitment to serving your community today, tomorrow, and into the future.