

## Exercise 1: Discussion Questions

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Read the questions below and discuss them with your instructor and your classmates. Try to consider the questions from several vantage points— as the editor, the reporter and the audience reading the story.

1. Normally, newspapers report every birth, death, divorce and bankruptcy in their community.
  - A. Do you agree with that policy? Why?
  - B. As editor, would you include the births to unwed mothers?
  
2. As editor, would you also report every local suicide? Why?
  
3. As editor of your local daily, you normally avoid cheesecake: pictures of scantily-clad young women. But a student on your campus won the Miss America preliminaries in your state and has flown to Atlantic City for the national finals. During the first day of competition there, your paper received only one photograph, and it shows her and two other contestants in bikinis at a beach. Would you publish the photograph? Why?
  
4. Assume that your mayor has often criticized the city's welfare system and the fact that some recipients are able-bodied adults, without children. If you learned that your mayor's 27-year-old son (who does not live at home) was broke because of a business failure and applying for welfare, would you publish the story?
  
5. Assume that three local high school students, each 15 years old, have been charged with arson; they started a fire that caused \$80,000 in damage at their high school, closing it for a day.
  - A. If you obtained the students' names, and it was legal to do so, would you identify them in your story?
  - B. Before publishing the story, would you call and warn (or interview) the students or their parents?
  
6. Reporters are forced to make difficult decisions about what elements of a story are most newsworthy. Assume that, earlier today, two men robbed a local restaurant and shot a customer. Then, during a high-speed chase through the city, a police car skidded out of control and struck a pedestrian, a 34-year-old nurse. Both the customer and the pedestrian have been hospitalized in serious condition.  
Which element would you emphasize in the first paragraph of your story, known as the lead: the customer shot by two robbers, or the pedestrian struck by police chasing the robbers?

7. If a member of the American Nazi Party spoke in your community and criticized blacks, Jews and immigrants, would you report the story? How could you justify the story's publication or suppression?
  
8. Imagine that a member of your city council, a Democrat, offered to give you information proving that store personnel had caught your mayor, a Republican, shoplifting. The store's owner declined to prosecute. Moreover, the Democrat insists that you keep his identity a secret: that you never identify your source. The Democrat is a potential candidate for mayor: an obvious rival. Yet the information is genuine. How would you respond?
  
9. Assume that a local woman today announced her candidacy for mayor. Which—if any—of these facts about her personal life would you include in a story about her candidacy?
  - A. She is 57 years old.
  - B. She is a millionaire.
  - C. She is the mother of four children.
  - D. She is 5 feet, 1 inch tall, has gray hair and weighs 180 pounds.
  - E. Her first husband died, and she divorced her second.
  - F. Her first husband committed suicide two years after their marriage.
  - G. After her husband's death, she transformed a small restaurant they established into one of the largest and finest in the city.
  - H. She now lives with a bank executive.
  - I. The bank executive is 36 years old.
  - J. One of her sons is a high school teacher. Two help her in the restaurant. The fourth is in prison, convicted of selling cocaine.
  
10. Which of the details you want to publish about the candidate described in Question 9 would affect her performance if she was elected mayor?
  - A. If some of the details about her private life would not affect her performance as mayor, how can you justify their publication?
  - B. Would you publish the same details about a male candidate?

## Exercise 2: Discussion Questions

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Read the questions below and discuss them with your instructor and your classmates. Try to consider the questions from several vantage points— as the editor, the reporter and the audience reading the story.

1. What do you think is "news"? Can you devise a good definition of the term?
2. Do you agree with Howard K. Smith and Al Neuharth, who believe that the media report too much bad news? If so, how would you correct the problem?
3. Chet Brinkley of ABC News said that he does not watch much local news on television: that he is tired of blood, knives, guns, death and destruction.
  - A. Do you think that Brinkley is right: that local newscasts devote too much time to crime and violence?
  - B. If so, why do you think that local newscasts devote so much time to that type of story?
  - C. Is the public inconsistent? Many Americans complain that the media report too much bad news. But would television stations broadcast that type of story if the public didn't like it: if the stories didn't help boost the stations' ratings?
4. Imagine that you edited your local daily. Would you have printed the controversial lyrics sung by 2 Live Crew? Why?
5. Imagine that you edited your local daily. How would you have handled the Mapplethorpe controversy: how specifically would you have described the photographs?
6. Assume that you edited your local daily and received the photographs reprinted in this chapter. Which of the photographs would you publish? Why?
7. Should newspapers devote more space to worthwhile causes and organizations in their communities, recognizing and promoting their good work?
8. While working for a newspaper— or any other medium—have you encountered any "sacred cows": policies that reflected the interests (or prejudices) of your editor or publisher?

9. Do you believe that journalists are objective? If not, would you want them to abandon the concept of objectivity? Why?
10. Do you read your local daily? Why?
- A. If you don't, is there anything that its editor could do to improve the paper so that you would read it?
  - B. If you (or a classmate) said you do not have time to read a daily newspaper, do you also lack the time to watch television?
  - C. If editors fail to interest young adults in reading newspapers, will that generation of Americans ever begin to read a paper? If not, how can newspapers survive?
11. A recent study concluded that young adults "know less and care less about news and public affairs than any other generation of Americans in the past 50 years?" Do you believe that conclusion is an accurate one? Why?
12. Do you agree with the statements that: (1) newspapers are obsolete, and that (2) reading newspapers is an old people's habit? Why?

## Exercise 3: News Judgment

**INSTRUCTIONS:** The decisions journalists make every day are difficult, involving matters of importance, interest, taste, ethics and myriad other considerations. The following questions ask you to make those types of decisions. After deciding which stories to use and emphasize, compare your decisions with your classmates'.

1. Imagine that, on the same day, the president of the United States presents his annual State of the Union message and the jury in O.J. Simpson's criminal trial announces its verdict. During his speech, the president proposes raising the minimum wage \$1. Which of the two stories would you place at the top of Page 1?
  
2. As editor of your local daily newspaper, you have space for one more photograph on Page 1. Circle the photograph in each of the following pairs that you would select.
  - A. A photograph showing 32 members of a local high school choir leaving to sing at a prestigious festival in Vienna.
  - B. A photograph showing a car torn in half by a train at a crossing in your city, killing the driver and her five young children.
  - C. A photograph showing a graduate of your college who won a Fulbright Scholarship to spend a year studying at Cambridge, England. While using a wheelchair, the student earned all A's and was president of your Student Senate.
  - D. A photograph showing a computer hacker who today pleaded guilty to entering your college's computer system and changing the grades of more than 100 other students, mostly members of a few fraternities and sororities. The hacker charged \$250 to change a grade, and school officials say it will take months and cost \$50,000 or more for them to verify every grade recorded in the past two years.
  - E. A photograph showing actor Meryl Streep visiting a sister who lives in your city.
  - F. A photograph showing dozens of children who are sick, hungry, poorly clothed and lying—and dying—outside an aid station: victims of one of the most severe droughts in African history.
  
3. Rank these nine stories by their newsworthiness, starting with "1" for the most newsworthy:
  - A. \_\_\_\_\_ A local businessman today donated \$12 million to construct a YMCA in your community.
  - B. \_\_\_\_\_ Your mayor today admitted that she is an alcoholic and is committing herself to a six-week residential treatment program—but will not resign.
  - C. \_\_\_\_\_ Your city's Economic Development Board today revealed that a major pharmaceutical company will open a plant in an industrial park in your city and hire 400 people.
  - D. \_\_\_\_\_ A thunderstorm struck your city at about 6 this morning, dropping 1.7 inches of rain. Wind gusts exceeding 40 mph blew down dozens of trees and left thousands of people without power.
  - E. \_\_\_\_\_ Singer and actor Barbra Streisand today underwent surgery for breast cancer.
  - F. \_\_\_\_\_ An Indian airliner crashed while trying to land at New Delhi's airport during a thunderstorm, killing all 230 people aboard.
  - G. \_\_\_\_\_ A three-alarm fire in an apartment complex in your city destroyed 12 units, leaving their residents homeless and two firefighters slightly injured.
  - H. \_\_\_\_\_ Your city's police department today settled a bias suit filed by eight current and former police officers, all women. The city agreed to pay \$540,000 to be divided equally among the women, who said that because of their gender they were never promoted.

- I. \_\_\_\_\_A busboy at a popular restaurant in your city has been diagnosed with tuberculosis, and health officials advise thousands of people who ate at the restaurant to be tested for the infectious disease.
4. Rank these nine stories by their newsworthiness, starting with "1" for the most newsworthy:
- \_\_\_\_\_The largest church in your city today announced plans to develop a new campus that will eventually include six buildings: a church, a social hall, a day care center, an elementary school, a three-story home for the elderly and recreational center for teens.
  - \_\_\_\_\_Officials at a local community college today learned that it has won a \$7.6 million federal grant to provide job training for welfare recipients. The program is expected to serve about 240 people a year for five years.
  - \_\_\_\_\_Stock car racer Dale Earnhardt was killed last night in a car accident on a highway near his home.
  - \_\_\_\_\_Someone bombed an abortion clinic in Chicago last night, causing \$100,000 in damage.
  - \_\_\_\_\_Oprah Winfrey today announced that she is getting married and quitting her television show to have and raise a family.
  - \_\_\_\_\_The president's wife will fly to your city and visit an elementary school with an innovative program for teaching foreign languages.
  - \_\_\_\_\_The stock market rose 2.8 percent yesterday, reaching a record high.
  - \_\_\_\_\_After years of debate, residents of Puerto Rico voted by a margin of 52-48 percent to become a state.
  - \_\_\_\_\_A new federal study has found that when a car collides with a larger pickup truck or sport utility vehicle, the driver of the car is 30 times more likely than the driver of the larger vehicle to be killed.
5. Normally, your newspaper does not report rumors. Mark any cases in which you would make an exception.
- \_\_\_\_\_Because of his success at your college during the past eight years, your football coach is reportedly being offered the top job at Notre Dame.
  - \_\_\_\_\_One of your city's largest employers is reportedly closing its manufacturing plant and moving to Mexico, terminating all 400 of its local jobs.
  - \_\_\_\_\_A popular and upscale department store—Saks Fifth Avenue—is reportedly considering a downtown site in your city.
  - \_\_\_\_\_During the past three months, four babies born at Mercy Hospital in your city have died. All were apparently healthy at birth. Hospital and state medical experts are reportedly investigating the existence of a deadly infection.
  - \_\_\_\_\_A popular anchorman on the top-rated local newscast in your city has reportedly been offered - and accepted—a job in Los Angeles.
6. If a 15-year-old boy in your community was charged with killing his mother and stepfather, which of these details would you include in your story and which would you discard?
- \_\_\_\_\_The boy was an Eagle Scout.
  - \_\_\_\_\_The boy had twice run away from home and twice been arrested by police.
  - \_\_\_\_\_The boy never knew his father, a construction worker who disappeared shortly after his birth.
  - \_\_\_\_\_The boy told friends that he hated his stepfather.
  - \_\_\_\_\_Friends said the boy shoplifted, usually beer, and was sometimes drunk.
  - \_\_\_\_\_Friends said they thought, but were not certain, the stepfather beat the boy, since while swimming they noticed bruises the boy refused to explain.

- G. \_\_\_\_\_The boy was 60 to 80 pounds overweight and a poor athlete.
  - H. \_\_\_\_\_Psychoanalyzing him, an English teacher who knew the boy said he seemed to be full of hostility he tried to repress.
  - I. \_\_\_\_\_Social workers investigated—but were unable to substantiate—suspicions that the boy was sexually molested by an uncle.
7. Patricia Richards, a 52-year-old business woman in your city, today announced that she is running for mayor. You know and can prove all the following facts, but have never reported them because she was a private citizen. Mark the facts you would report today.
- A. \_\_\_\_\_Richards has been divorced three times.
  - B. \_\_\_\_\_At the age of 17, Richards and two friends were charged with stealing a car. The charges were dropped because the car was recovered undamaged and the car's owner, a neighbor, declined to prosecute.
  - C. \_\_\_\_\_Richards has diabetes.
  - D. \_\_\_\_\_Richards has had two abortions.
  - E. \_\_\_\_\_Richards is a recovered alcoholic; she has not had a drink in 20 years.
  - F. \_\_\_\_\_Before going into business for herself, she was fired from two other jobs because of her drinking.
  - G. \_\_\_\_\_Her campaign literature says she attended the University of Iowa, yet she never graduated.
  - H. \_\_\_\_\_She established, owns and manages the city's largest chain of furniture stores.
  - I. \_\_\_\_\_Various tax and other public records reveal that her chain of furniture stores is valued at \$20 million and, last year, earned a profit of \$2.3 million.
  - J. \_\_\_\_\_Each year, Richards donates more than \$1 million to local charities that help troubled young women, but always avoids publicity, insisting that the charities never mention her donations.