

Ethical Erasure: An Analysis of Online Content-Removal Practices in Award-Winning Student Newsrooms

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements in
an undergraduate senior capstone course in communications

Abstract

As society has realized, the internet is forever. This study analyzes the decisions and ethical guidelines top-tier student news organizations use when deciding whether to remove content from their online publications. This research reveals a lack of an industry-wide ethical standard for both professional and student newsrooms. In-depth interviews with student leaders delve into the questions and concerns weighed by these leaders when confronted with these ethical dilemmas. This paper compares the handling of these situations and creates a basic framework for student news organizations to follow when deciding these issues.

I. Introduction

Newspapers can be thrown out and broadcasts archived, but as the millennial-proverb goes, “The internet is forever.” The eternity of online news coverage, specifically relating to crime reporting, has been brought into the limelight by the debate over an individual’s “right to be forgotten,” also known as the “right to erasure.” The ongoing discourse over ethical online content removal has happened at every level of the journalism industry leaving many reporters and editors caught in a catch-22¹ between integrity and empathy.

Many professional U.S. newsrooms have yet to develop a fully-fledged removal policy, but an exception to that is Cleveland.com (Webster, 2018). A group of journalists working for the online news website have been developing a new model to address public concern over the right to be forgotten. After fielding removal requests, these journalists meet every month or so to discuss and decide what content stays and goes. These meetings can result in photographs, names and even entire articles being removed online. At the moment, however, the “Cleveland Model” is only considered experimental. Without professional standards to use as a guide, student media organizations are left to handle the same debate.

During his tenure as the editor-in-chief of The Daily Northwestern, Troy Closson found himself at the epicenter of a national controversy about his newsroom’s content-removal practices. Student reporters covered protestors as they rallied against former-Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who was visiting Northwestern University. These journalists later used the university’s online directory to identify and request interviews from the students involved in the protest. This sparked backlash among activists who felt this was an invasion of their privacy.

¹ A catch-22 is a dilemma where there is no escape because of mutually conflicting or dependent conditions.

Keywords: journalism, ethics, online news, student media, newsroom policy
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They demanded both a formal apology from The Daily Northwestern and the removal of any published names and photographs relating to student activists. Closson, alongside seven other leaders, conceded by issuing an apology and removing the controversial content from the newsroom's website. That's when the catch-22 caught Closson. Hundreds of professional journalists took to social media to both berate and support his decision. But without any industry-wide online content removal standards, the debate around The Daily's actions remains inconclusive. Barely over a month before the debacle at Northwestern, a similar controversy sparked national debate at Harvard University regarding the Harvard Crimson's reporting on U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.²

This research plans to study and compare the current online content removal practices of award-winning student newsrooms. This study will use the information gathered from the policies to develop a general guideline for students to consider when navigating these ethnically-ambiguous situations.

II. Literature Review

In mass communication literature, student media is still a relatively untapped scholarly topic. This literature review summarizes the few scholars that have explored niche topics regarding the development and implementation of student media ethics. Research conducted in this field has focused on the increase in student media participation, the role of student media on college campuses, the importance of journalism education, and the development of student media ethics. The purpose of this literature review is to create a solid foundation of understanding in preparation for this research paper's transition into the topic of online content removal in student media organizations.

In the last 20 years, the U.S. has seen the final front pages of almost 1,800 newspapers and a 45% reduction in newsroom employment — the sharp decline of local news organizations and professionals has left thousands of citizens across the country without a local news source (Abernathy, 2018). This local news crisis has created a void that student news organizations — especially collegiate ones — have begun to fill. This task is especially prevalent in “news deserts,” which have no other source of local news to rely on. These daunting statistics have done little to slow high school and collegiate student interest in journalism.

According to a 2019 national survey conducted by The Education Week Research Center (EWRC), 30% of high school journalism educators have seen an increase in student interest in pursuing journalism in college. Approximately the same statistical growth is mirrored in the number of students interested in majoring in journalism, as well as the number of students participating in collegiate student media. Some scholars suggest this rising interest in journalism is associated with “the increased professionalism of journalism students where focus is set on becoming the scrutinizer. From this point of view, it is not the independency in everyday work that is important but making a difference in society,” (Andersson & Wadbring, 2015, p. 134).

The role of student media on college campuses

With the decline of local news and rising interest in student media, scholars have studied the role of student media organizations on college campuses. A survey from the EWRC found that 81% of student respondents trusted student media “a great deal” or “a fair amount.” That percentage of trust rose to 91% among journalism educators. Little to no research has been done to understand the factors that lead to the establishment of trust between student news organizations and its audiences. Scholars have been able to identify the roles the student press fulfills on a college campus: historically documenting events, creating a public forum, acting as a watchdog for community issues and providing a training ground for the next generation of journalists (Russo & Hapney, 2013). Other scholars have also looked into the role of college newspapers as a pedagogical tool, presenting the purposes of a collegiate paper. According to scholars, the role of a collegiate newspaper can be seen as an attempted mirror of the professional world or a normative training ground for the next generation of journalists that is shaped and run by student decisions (Bockino, 2018).

Scholars have taken time to research the role collegiate media plays in providing a training ground for future professional journalists. Current literature suggests “student journalists do more than simulate.

² For more about The Harvard Crimson's catch-22, read here: <https://nyti.ms/2MFzWKd>

They use their knowledge and skills engaging in 'real life.' When they report on courts, these are real courts," (Burgh, 2003, p. 108). While these hard skills are critical to develop before entering the professional world, research states that the "vaunted divide between the academic and the practical is a false dichotomy," (Burgh, 2003, p. 110). According to Burgh, "in order to perform their functions journalists need an education which enables them to put themselves and their society in perspective; find out anything and question everything. Motor skills yes, but also the intellectual confidence which comes from knowledge," (Burgh, 2003, p. 110). There is currently not a large base of literature about the prevalence of this type of education among collegiate communication institutions. But when looking into the use of collegiate journalism as a pedagogical tool, a small body of literature has developed specifically around the education of ethics. Interestingly enough, scholars have found that the priorities set by journalism students and educators regarding journalism education are often not in accordance (Braun, 2009).

The development of student media ethics

Research on professional journalists has found that those working in the field of journalism have higher levels of moral development and should be considered strong ethical thinkers. "When ethical problems are professionally focused, journalists perform even better. This suggests that giving journalists the opportunity to work through more ethical dilemmas ... bodes well for the profession. This also indicates there is a journalistic domain of knowledge and that journalists think even better about ethical problems in that domain than they do about general problems," (Coleman & Wilkins, 2004, p. 521). Since, according to Burgh, student journalists are journalists, the same findings can be generally applied to students working in collegiate newsrooms.

This is supported by the work some scholars have conducted regarding the reactions of student journalists to different ethical situations. Scholars have found that "students with experience in student media would show higher levels of concern and expect stronger penalties for unethical journalistic practices than those without experience in student media," (Conway & Goshek, 2009, p. 474). This study allows others conducting research in this field to hypothesize that student journalists would maintain those same levels of ethical standards, when engaging with public requests for the removal of content. At the moment, this can only be predicted. The same study "points out the continued efforts that need to be made in understanding the different motivations, interests, and beliefs of students in today's journalism and mass communications programs," (Conway & Goshek, 2009).

A knowledge gap in student media

While there has been research conducted regarding rising student media participation, the role of student media on a college campus, the importance of journalism education, and the development of student media ethics, this study will focus on understanding the general practices of top-tier student media organizations regarding online content removal. This research comes at a time when the professional and collegiate worlds of journalism are being asked difficult questions regarding crime coverage and a citizen's right to be forgotten (Rosen, 2012).

The analysis and discussion of this content will be viewed through the lens of "the harm principle," a subcategory of ethical theory. This principle was created by British philosopher John Stuart Mill, who believed the only reason power should be rightfully exercised over a citizen within a civilized community, against their will, is to prevent harm to others (Holtug, 2002). This principle is ideally used for this research because it reflects one of the four principles of ethical journalism established by The Society of Professional Journalists, "minimize harm." These standards are what many student newsrooms strive to abide by. Through understanding how top-tier student media organizations navigate the principles of ethical journalism during discussions about the content removal, this work will attempt to create a general guideline for other student newsrooms that may face similar discussions in the future.

Research Goals and Questions

This study's research questions focus on understanding the current online content removal practices of top-tier student media organizations and develop a general ethical guideline for other student newsrooms to use when dealing with content removal requests from the public.

RQ1: Are there common online content removal practices among award-winning student newsrooms? If so, what are they? If not, how are removal requests handled?

RQ2: How can the practices of these organizations be used to create an ethical standard that other student newsrooms would be able to use?

III. Methods

This study conducted thorough in-depth interviews with the leaders of award-winning student media organizations to analyze the newsroom's online-content removal practices. The interview process revealed common themes and ethical practices. The information gathering process for this research is based on a study that conducted in-depth interviews with cancer patients in order to compare different experiences during the varying stages of the disease (Boudioni et al., 2000, p. 910). By studying top-tier student newsrooms, this research hopes to create a reputable standard for other student journalists to consider implementing.

While a definitive list of the best student newsrooms in the country is unavailable, many top organizations are recognized with student journalism's preeminent prize, the Pacemaker Awards. These are presented by the National Scholastic Press Association to organizations that have produced top-tier work on online, newspaper, yearbook, magazine, and broadcast platforms. Entries are judged by groups of professionals based on coverage and content, quality of writing and reporting, leadership, design, photography and graphics. Since this research focuses on the removal of web content, it will analyze the recent winners — from 2016 to 2019 — of Online Pacemaker Awards. Among this group, this study will focus on news websites in four-year institutions.

During this time frame, four student media organizations won an Online Pacemaker three times. For showing this high degree of consistent excellence in online student media, the following newsrooms were selected for this study: The Daily Egyptian at Southern Illinois University, The Minnesota Daily at The University of Minnesota, The Equinox at Keene State College, and The Daily Bruin at The University of California, Los Angeles. The primary student leader of these websites — who usually holds the title of editor-in-chief — was interviewed about their organization's current online content removal practices. Their participation in this research was granted if the students explicitly gave their informed consent to have their responses recorded and studied. These leaders were asked three sets of questions.

The first set (S1) of questions developed a basic understanding of the newsroom and the student leader's role in the organization.

S1Q1: What year did your website launch?

S1Q2: How many staff members work in your newsroom?

S1Q3: How long is your tenure as the editor-in-chief of your newsroom? What is the process behind being selected for this position?

S1Q4: Can you describe your crime coverage? What incidents do you report or not report? If reported, what information do you publish?

S1Q5: What is the newsroom's editorial relationship with the college or university? What type of monetary or mentorship support does the organization receive from the college or university?

The second set (S2) of questions focused on understanding the process the student media organization goes through to establish newsroom-wide policies. This set also broke down potential examples of the student newsroom's current online content removal practices.

S2Q1: Is there a code of ethics or a policy manual that is followed in your newsroom?

S2Q2: What is the process that establishes these ethics and manuals? Who are the individuals involved in creating these?

S2Q3: Does the organization have a formal policy regarding the removal of online content from its website?

S2Q4: Has a member of the public ever requested to have related-content removed? If so, can you explain the circumstance? And how was the removal request handled?

The third set (S3) of questions focused on hypothetical situations of online content removal requests by a member of the public. These illustrated how the organization and the student leader would deal with different scenarios.

S3Q1: Imagine your newsroom reports on a student charged with drug possession and the intent to distribute — publishing their name, crime and mugshot. Several weeks later, that student asks to have that content removed because of the way the article has negatively affected their social standing. How would this be handled?

S3Q2: Imagine your newsroom reports on a student being charged with driving under the influence. A year later, that student sends their expungement to the newsroom and requests that the content is removed because of the way it has negatively affected their job search. How would this be handled?

S3Q3: Imagine your newsroom publishes a photo of a crowd of people attending a public event. Several weeks later, a student asks for the photo to be removed because she can be easily identifiable. The student is from a conservative country that requires women to wear certain religious clothing. She states that if her relatives see the photo, she will be in danger of bodily harm. How would this be handled?

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The recordings were coded to look for common themes throughout the student leaders' responses, and answers were sorted by similarity. The results of the coding were used to develop a general best practices guideline for other student media organizations.

IV. Findings

General findings

The student leaders of all four newsrooms were willing to participate in the study. To contextualize the circumstances of the editors, the chart below provides general details about each student media organization.

Table 1. Student Media Organization Graphics

	The Daily Egyptian	The Minnesota Daily	The Equinox	The Daily Bruin
Link	www.dailyegyptian.com	www.mndaily.com	www.kscequinox.com	www.dailybruin.com
Established	1888	1900	N/A	1919
Location	Carbondale, Illinois	Minneapolis, Minnesota	Keene, New Hampshire	Los Angeles, California
Host Institution	Southern Illinois University	University of Minnesota	Keene State College	University of California, L.A.
Institution Type	Public	Public	Public	Public
Student Leader	Rana Schenke	Cleo Krejci	Puja Thapa	Anjie Forburger
Appointment	Elected	Elected	Elected	Elected
Tenure	Semester	Academic Year	Academic Year	Academic Year
Staff Size	~30	~300	~20	~350

An unexpected finding from the study was the varying relationships between the student media organization and its host institution. All four newsrooms receive financial funding from its host institution through some form of student fee, and are housed in university property free of charge. The media advisers for three of the student newsrooms are also faculty members of the host institution. While strong connections between the newsroom and its host institution existed, all four editors considered their organizations editorially independent, meaning the student editors have the freedom to make decisions without interference from the host institution.

All four editors-in-chief interviewed for this research were women. Among these leaders, two were seniors and two were juniors.

Research Question One

This research found no common online content removal practices among these award-winning student newsrooms. Each organization handled removal requests uniquely. Only two of the organizations had publicly-available statements regarding content removal. The two newsroom policies, which are available on the organizations' websites, are:

The Daily Egyptian

Stories published in the Daily Egyptian are kept in our online database in perpetuity. We do not remove stories that have been published from our website (The Daily Egyptian, 2020).

The Minnesota Daily

Removing published content should be considered on a case-by-case basis, but generally regarded as a last case scenario. We stand behind our standards of transparency, and therefore do not remove content from the public's eye after it has been published except in extreme circumstances. Circumstances which may warrant content being "taken down" after publication include extreme cases of libel or blatant inaccuracy. All other unforeseen situations must be handled with caution and in line with the standards of the organization. The editor-in-chief should ensure that a copy of what was removed is easily accessible should it need to be examined. If content is removed, it must be clearly communicated with the audience, typically in the form of an editor's note, as to remain transparent (The Minnesota Daily, 2020).

Rana Schenke, editor-in-chief of The Daily Egyptian, clarified that there are exceptions to her organization's statement that says content is not removed. While the policies and perspectives of both these newsrooms stress the importance of avoiding content removal when possible, neither explain the process of how removal requests would be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. When explaining the internal handling of removal requests, the responses from the editors of The Daily Bruin and The Equinox — which did not have a publicly available policy — were very similar to the policies of the other two newsrooms. The two editors stated that content removal requests were dealt with on a case-by-case basis, and while content removal was avoided, it was possible in extreme cases.

Between these four newsrooms, there was no coherent trend or common explanation for how these policies were formally updated. It was clear, however, that the editors-in-chief of each newsroom was in charge of facilitating any changes to organization-wide policies.

This research clearly shows that no common online content removal policy exists and that the policies of student newsrooms are subject to change at any point during the tenures of different editors-in-chief. The tenures for this position usually last for a semester or an academic school year. While no two policies may be exactly the same, seven key themes emerged through comparing the processes of these student leaders.

Theme one: Determining the decision

These four newsrooms practice two primary methods of deciding the outcome of removal requests. The Daily Egyptian, The Minnesota Daily, and The Daily Bruin share a similar model where the editor-in-chief

is the lone decision maker on whether or not online content is removed. The advice of others may be sought depending on the situation, but the ultimate decision is made by the editor-in-chief. Since the editors-in-chief make the final call, they are also in charge of removing the content from the website.

The Equinox, on the other hand, makes decisions regarding removal requests through a majority vote from its editorial board. This board generally consists of 16 student members holding a variety of leadership positions in the newsroom. The number of board members, however, is subject to change depending on the time of year and the level of student interest in the organization. When handling a removal request, the editor-in-chief explains the situation to the board and then facilitates a discussion on the merits of the request. This discussion concludes with a vote and the decision is only acted on if 51% or more of the board votes in favor of the action. The process of what would happen in the event of a tie vote is unclear, however, Puja Thapa, administrative executive editor of The Equinox, said this was not a common issue. Following the vote, one of the board members, the webmaster, would be in charge of removing the online content.

Theme two: Asking for advice

The use of advisory or editorial boards when handling removal requests is divided equally among the newsrooms. Both The Equinox and The Daily Egyptian have access to a student editorial board when dealing with removal requests. In contrast to The Equinox, the editor-in-chief of The Daily Egyptian chooses when to seek the opinion of the board and only uses it for counsel.

While the editors-in-chief of The Daily Bruin and The Minnesota Daily do not elect to use editorial boards when making these decisions, both editors stated that when dealing with removal requests they often ask for the advice of other editors and reporters involved. Depending on the situation, editors may also seek the advice of their newsroom adviser. Both editors-in-chief stressed that they seek the advice of others for the majority of removal requests.

The use of editorial boards or the advice of others is completely dependent on the editor-in-chief at the time — it is not an institutionalized requirement at The Daily Egyptian, The Daily Bruin and The Minnesota Daily.

Theme three: Reasoning behind removals

Many nuanced details were debated by the editors-in-chief of these newsrooms during the times they addressed removal requests. While it would be impossible to create a complete list of relevant details applicable to every request, there were some common questions these editors asked themselves. The questions are:

Requester identity: Is the individual requesting for the content to be removed actually the individual being affected by its publishing? How can this be verified?

Request reasoning: Is the individual claiming the misreporting or fabrication of information? If so, is their claim verifiable? Or are they claiming that while the published content is accurate, it has a negative effect on their life?

Potential harm: How is the content negatively affecting the individual? How would the removal of this content negatively affect the rest of the general public? Does one outweigh the other?

Public service: Is the article still serving the public? Can this information still be considered public interest?

Historical record: Will the removal of this article or identifiable information concerning the individual be erasing history important for future generations?

These topical questions are simply the foundation of a toolbox that can be used in discussions regarding online content removal. Every nuanced situation would naturally add to the toolbox.

Theme four: Ethical erasure

All of the editors-in-chief in this study clearly stated the complete removal of an article was avoided at all costs. Whenever possible it was preferred to issue a correction or replace identifiable information with ambiguous terms. For example, the name John Doe would be replaced with “a student.”

Theme five: Presenting to the public

It is the responsibility of the editors-in-chief of all four newsrooms to act as the main line of communication between the individual requesting the removal of content and the student media organization. Several of the editors interviewed for this study emphasized three critical aspects of this communication. First, only the editor-in-chief communicates with the requester because having one distinct newsroom representative is critical to maintaining clear communication with the individual. Second, all communication between the editor-in-chief and the requester is on-the-record. Copies of email threads and phone conversations are meticulously kept. Third, the requester deserves a response. Whatever the end result regarding the removal request may be, the editor-in-chief must notify the individual about the final decision.

The editor-in-chief is also in charge of clearly communicating the response to a removal request to the rest of the public. For example, a removal request was filed to The Minnesota Daily regarding an editorial published by the organization, which was proven to be inaccurate and misleading. While completely removing the editorial from the website was considered, Cleo Krejci, former editor-in-chief of The Minnesota Daily, decided against it. She instead chose to issue an italicized Editor’s Note at the top of the story explaining her decision and referring readers to the correction. Krejci’s published note, which is available on the organization’s website, read:

Editor’s note: there is a substantial correction for this article. We are choosing to leave the original body of text for the sake of transparency – not as an endorsement of the inaccuracies. The correction can be found at the bottom of this page. (Krejci, 2019)

According to Krejci, her decision was in keeping with The Minnesota Daily’s policy that states “If content is removed, it must be clearly communicated with the audience, typically in the form of an editor’s note, as to remain transparent.” When handling removal requests, The Minnesota Daily was the only newsroom that had a policy detailing its communication with the public.

Theme six: Appealing to advisers

Even though the type of adviser relationships varied between the four newsrooms, the choice to involve advisers was always a conscious decision made by the editor-in-chief. According to all of the editors, it is not common practice to involve advisers in every removal request discussion. Both The Minnesota Daily’s and The Daily Egyptian’s written policy do not mention adviser involvement. The decision to do so was clearly in the hands of the students in each of these newsrooms.

Theme seven: Picking the pace

The timeliness of handling removal requests varied between the newsrooms and the individual cases. No common timespan in which the editors-in-chief would resolve a removal request emerged. The handling of such requests varied from less than a day to more than a year.

Research Question Two

The diversity of responses from the four editors made it clear that when dealing with such a nuanced topic as removal requests, no single all-encompassing ethical standard exists. The discovery of these seven themes, however, can be used to create a general guideline that newsrooms can use and later adapt to their own circumstances.

V. Discussion

The creation of a general ethical structure for collegiate and high school newsrooms is especially difficult when considering the hundreds of varying circumstances faced by different student media organizations across the country. Even though in this case one size doesn't fit all, the seven themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews with the editors-in-chief of these award-winning student organizations can be compiled to create an ethical foundation for other newsrooms to follow and later update.

It is critical to the survival of a free student press that the ultimate decision regarding online content removal remains solely in the hands of students. In this case, in the hands of one student. The decision-making process of The Daily Egyptian, The Minnesota Daily and The Daily Bruin — where the editor-in-chief makes the ultimate decision to keep or remove content — is the most efficient and universally usable way to handle removal requests. The Equinox's democratic approach to removal requests would always pose a logistical challenge when bringing together so many individuals. The idea of allowing too many students an equal vote in such an ethically-charged decision may also pave the path for groupthink and bandwagon decision making. The position of editor-in-chief is also often elected in student newsrooms, meaning that members often do have a voice in deciding their leader. Even though editors-in-chief are ultimately in charge of making the decisions, they would be wise to consider the advice of those around them.

The importance of listening to all sides of the argument is critical for the editor-in-chief when making these decisions. To ensure that vibrant discussion and critical thinking is a part of every removal request decision, the creation of an Ethical Advisory Board would be beneficial, with the purpose of assisting the editor-in-chief. This board would consist of both permanent and rotating members, such as:

Newsroom adviser/s: The thoughts and opinions of advisers would be instrumental in a discussion because diversity in thought is critical to ethical decision making. The experiences of the adviser both in the professional world and at the student newsroom would be invaluable. This position would be a permanent member of the board.

Managing editor: The student immediately below the editor-in-chief, most commonly called the managing editor, would provide an important student perspective to the discussion. In many cases, the person in this position eventually transitions to the editor-in-chief role. It would be important for the managing editor to be a part of the ethical discussion and learn about ethical decision making before having to make the final decision. This position would be a permanent member of the board.

Section editor: The student leader of whichever section the removal request is pertaining to is also included on the board. This person would add their niche expertise to the discussion and provide another student voice. This position would be a rotating member of the board.

Reporter/Writer: The content creator is also included within ethical discussions to ensure that the situation is put into proper context and all sides of the issue are given equal voice. This position would be a rotating member of the board.

Unaffiliated professional journalist: If possible, bringing in a local journalist to weigh in on the discussion would be a significant contribution. Including someone who is unaffiliated with the student newsroom and completely removed from the situation would provide an untainted new perspective.

To reiterate, these five individuals would weigh in on a removal request decision, but the editor-in-chief would still make the ultimate decision. While the power must always remain in the hands of students, it is critical that editors-in-chief are given adequate guidance. At the end of the day students are making professional decisions while still learning the ins-and-outs of the trade:

We are playing with a lot of really impactful information. . . . As students, the fact of the matter is that we are inexperienced, and we are still learning. So, there's a lot of room for error. And I think it calls upon the editor-in-chief and the managing editor to really be cognizant of that power and ask around for a lot of help and making sure that you make the best decision so you don't harm somebody. (C. Krejci, personal communication through an in-depth interview, March 26, 2020).

The creation of an Ethical Advisory Board would also assure that meaningful discussion and ethical consistency plays a role in every removal request. One of the greatest difficulties faced by student media organizations is the constant turnover of leadership, which can lead the public attempting to find inconsistencies in ethical policies:

It seems that a lot of the same people reach out, each year to different editors-in-chief because they think that there's a chance that the policy changed or something, so it'd be worth asking again, [which proves] the importance of having a consistent policy in place." (A. Forburger, personal communication through an in-depth interview, April 4, 2020).

The tenures of the four editors-in-chief included in this research lasted for a year or less. This constant transition between leaders makes it exceedingly difficult for decades-old student media organizations to remain consistent in its handling of removal requests. The creation of an Ethical Advisory Board would take steps towards remedying this.

When communicating with the public, it is critical to remain completely transparent about any changes to published content. If edits are introduced into an article following a removal request, it is advised that the changes are addressed in an Editor's Note at the top of the story. The placement of the note is critical. Its location at the beginning of an article is the best assurance a reader sees the note before continuing to read. In its simplest form, the note may explicitly state what type of content was removed — a name, an address, a photo. The editor-in-chief is advised to be in charge of deciding whether or not to explain the reasoning behind the removal. The extensiveness of the explanation is a discussion that the editor-in-chief can have with the Ethical Advisory Board.

The rate of removal requests received by a student newsroom will fluctuate and forever remain unpredictable. In an effort to assure some form of consistency, the Ethical Advisory Board and the editor-in-chief is advised to commit to meeting at least once a semester to discuss all removal requests. Understandably, bringing together the board for every request may prove to be logistically difficult. By committing to at least a meeting a semester, the editor-in-chief would be able to communicate with the individual requesting content removal when they can expect a decision.

This research confirms the research discussed in the literature review, further emphasizing the importance of collegiate journalism as a pedagogical tool for professional journalism and the development of student media organization ethics. The suggestion of an Ethical Advisory Board expands upon the established research on student media ethical guidelines and prompts a discussion for the need of more industry-wide consistency.

VI. Conclusion

This research is an exploratory study that is metaphorically a stab in the dark. The topic of student media ethical practices is woefully under researched; this paper is an attempt to illuminate issues facing student journalists. While the newsrooms studied are among the best in student media, four organizations is not enough to fully represent the dozens of newsrooms that produce excellent student journalism. It is advised that a larger sample of student media organizations are examined in the future. While the newsroom selection was completely based on the number of recent Online Pacemaker Awards, the host institutions of these four student media organizations happened to be all public schools. To provide a more usable ethical foundation, researchers may consider including the online content removal practices of top-tier student newsrooms in private schools.

The understanding of ethical practices across newsrooms in similar contexts is critical to making sure an industry standard is developed. This is true for both student, local, and national newsrooms. Further ethical research could be conducted into the different levels of journalism to ensure the public is experiencing fair and ethical treatment across the country. One of this study's interesting findings is that all four editors-in-chief interviewed were female. Future research could also be conducted into the role of women in student newsrooms. Anecdotally, it seems that women make up the majority of student media organizations around the country — and even the majority of student populations. But for an unknown reason, it seems very few women eventually find themselves in leadership positions in professional newsrooms (Beam & Di Cicco, 2010). For the survival of an all-encompassing news agenda and public service reporting (Craft & Wanta, 2004), any obstacles keeping women from taking on leadership roles in newsrooms needs to be fully identified and subsequently removed.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. However, in full transparency, at the time of this study the author was a leader of a student media organization. During his time in student media, the author dealt with several online content removal requests. The author does not believe this affected the study or its findings.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, the author would like to extend his gratitude to the four student editors who were so willing to participate in the study and were incredibly generous with their time. Second, the author would like to thank Harlen Makemson, professor of communication design at Elon University, for the patience and supervision he gave this research. Third, both Colin Donohue, director of School of Communications student engagement and alumni affairs, and Kelly Furnas, lecturer in journalism at Elon University, challenged the author to think critically and work purposefully throughout every step of the process — without them this paper would be of no tangible help to student journalists. Lastly, the author would like to thank Maria Ramirez and Audrey Harris for their steadfast support and detailed editing throughout the writing process.

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