Ethics in Journalism: A Conversation

Super Regional Meeting
September 27, 2017
Congress is considering changes to the health care law, which critics say could make it harder for people with pre-existing conditions to get care. The host of your weekly news program has a brother with a pre-existing condition. The brother writes a well-reasoned argument about why the plan is a bad idea. The host wants to share it on his Facebook page. **Colleagues, by show of hands, should the program host share the brother’s post?**

**Yes.** The host is not endorsing that viewpoint.

**No.** By sharing his brother’s view, the host is giving his audience a reason to think that he cannot report on the topic objectively.
Scenario #1 (continued)

Now let’s say this wasn’t a news program host, but the host of a socially conscious music show on your station. **What would you do in that case?**

A. Nothing. Listeners know music hosts aren’t part of the news department.

B. Tell the host she can’t make political pronouncements on social media.
Scenario #2

Your news team is doing an in-depth series on oil production and because it isn’t in the budget, sponsors need to be secured. The only sponsor that you secure is an oil and gas corporation. Should the series proceed?

Yes. The firewall is in place and the funder cannot influence the coverage.

No. One funder creates the perception of bias even if it does not exist.
Scenario #3

A longtime donor sends you a strongly worded note, threatening to pull her major gifts because of the bias she perceives in a particular program. In her view, the coverage is not directly proportional to the demographics of the country, and overly represents the perspectives of diverse populations. **How do you respond?**

A. Thank the donor and let her pull her funding.
B. Try to engage with the donor.
C. Punt to the NPR Ombudsman.
Scenario #4

You’re a university licensee undertaking a capital campaign to build a new studio. A celebrity alumnus has agreed to give a major grant to support the campaign. Delighted, the president of the university reaches out to encourage you to book the alumnus on a show. **What do you do?**

A. Tell the president you can’t feature the individual on the station but you will give the person a tour.

B. Tell your show producer that the individual should be booked.
On Sept. 19, NPR reported that under the provisions of the Graham-Cassidy health care bill, “there would be no guarantee of coverage for people with pre-existing conditions.” The next day, Cassidy’s twitter account called out @NPR, saying that was “false.” What should NPR do?

A. Ignore Cassidy’s claim.
B. Have our Media Relations department issue a statement saying we stand by our reporting.
C. Reply in a tweet that “No, @BillCassidy, you’re the one spreading falsehoods.”
D. Something else.
Sen @BillCassidy called our reading of his health care bill on pre-existing conditions false. Here’s how we read it: n.pr/2fAWevD

@BillCassidy

Replying to @NPR

@NPR FALSE. Under the bill, states must ensure that individuals with pre-existing conditions have access to adequate & affordable insurance.

9:27 AM - 20 Sep 2017

4,757 Retweets 5,615 Likes
Prior to ACA, insurers routinely excluded care for cancer or mental health or made the coverage so expensive that it was out of reach

Current law (ACA) guarantees coverage for 10 “essential health benefits”—in every exchange policy in every state bit.ly/2wGO8qS

Those EHBs are central to pre-existing condition protections because they define what an insurance policy is required to cover

#GrahamCassidy allows states to opt out of EHBs. That could mean a person with diabetes can be charged extra for a plan with Rx drug coverage

Allowing states to opt out of EHBs under #GrahamCassidy could also mean a person with depression may not find a plan with mental health coverage

Sen. @BillCassidy says his bill ensures that people with pre-existing conditions have access to “adequate & affordable” coverage

With no EHB requirements and no subsidies, “adequate” and “affordable” is left up to states and does not guarantee coverage.
Your Turn: Stump the Panel

Share your real -- or imagined -- journalistic ethical dilemmas for response by the panel.