

Newsworthy vs trustworthy

On numerous occasions, I'm asked how we decide what to print, what to leave out and why we report some of the things we do.

As a matter of fact, at the Apple Festival over the weekend, someone asked me why we hadn't printed anything about the break-in at the high school. Another person asked if we reported on suicides.

So, I thought now might be a good time to explain a little of what goes into the thought process of putting out a community newspaper. And, by a community newspaper, I mean one that cares about more than circulation numbers or an individual's own inflated sense of self-importance.

To give you the short answers:

We have not published the details of a break-in at Bloomfield High School recently because as of Tuesday evening, the Bloomfield Police and the Greene County Prosecutor's Office were still working on sorting out who did what, who was going to jail and who was going back to prison.

The people involved already knew what was happening, and that was good enough for us. We have a responsibility not to accidentally tip the police department's hand to the criminals - lest they head for Florida and are never heard from again because they're staring down the barrel at 23 separate felonies.

So, you will probably read all of the details of the break-in in next week's paper - after some folks have been rounded up and are officially charged.

I realize that the alleged 'story' has been reported elsewhere. However, I feel we have an ethical responsibility to help police in their investigation, not hamper their efforts in the name of 'news.'

That's the difference between 'journalism' and community journalism. It's also the difference between community journalism and irresponsibility.

On the subject of suicides, that answer is very, very simple: we never report them.

Well, almost never.

Here's the deal:

Unless you are a public figure, do yourself in in a public place or do something very unusual - like hold police at bay for hours - a suicide is not news.

Besides, if someone is disgusted enough with life to end their own, then those around them have already suffered enough - without reading about it on the front page.

Plus, the people who really need to know the details already know the details. The rest is just

off the RECORD

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gossip.

But in the questions I received at the Apple Festival, there is a larger question at play - What does one report and what does one decide to leave out?

That answer is a little harder to come by.

The Society of Professional

Journalists several years ago revamped its Code of Ethics. I was actually part of this revision, having participated in numerous surveys and studies on the matter of modern journalism ethics.

What came out was a new code that I think better reflects how we in the world of news should try to act.

The first line is, "Seek the truth and report it."

It goes on to say that, "Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information."

Pretty cut-and-dry.

Secondly, we should, "Minimize harm."

"Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect."

Acting independently is mentioned next.

Relatively elementary stuff here.

But, perhaps the most important section of the code of ethics consists of a two-word title - Be Accountable.

"Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other. ... Journalists should abide by the same high standards to which they hold others."

While the Society of Professional Journalists was putting together this code of ethics, I believe they left out one vital part - a part which I have added to any code of ethics I required my newspaper staffs to adhere to without exception.

That rule is to remember that before you are a grand and glorious and powerful 'journalist,' you are a member of the community in which you live and work. You are given a great gift by the general public - their trust.

To allow one's ego, getting the 'scoop', or the pursuit of corporate profit to compromise this trust is simply unacceptable.

So, you won't read about the break-in at the high school until next week. If we lose a couple of subscribers because we got 'scooped,' that's fine.

I can sleep well in the knowledge that we are doing our best to serve you - and not just ourselves.

(R. Michael Johnson is Editor and Publisher of the Bloomfield Free Press and writes Off the Record as a weekly Opinion Page feature. It appears every Wednesday.)