

News Literacy/Spring 2011

Students: Print this document, read it and **bring it to your recitation.**

Ethical Choices

Recitation Activity

1. You are city editor for a large metropolitan daily newspaper. It's a slow news day. The phone rings and a female caller says "I've got photos that will knock your socks off." The caller arrives minutes later with glossy prints showing supermodel Kim Calhoun at a private party shooting up what appears to be heroin. Calhoun is the spokesperson for "Good Girl" jeans and is about to sign a new \$10 million contract. Your source tells you she was invited to the party by a friend of Calhoun's and that she carried a tiny camera in her handbag, suspecting illegal drugs might be used. Other photos at the party show friends and associates of Calhoun and the photographer identifies them for you. You assign a reporter to check out the story. He reaches several people who were at the party and they all confirm on a source basis that Calhoun was using drugs, including heroin, and "was out of control." The use of illegal drugs may put her contract in jeopardy.

Do you publish the story and the pictures? Why or why not?

2. Your reporter gets a tip that a popular Little League coach had been convicted of sexual abuse of a nine-year-old boy more than two decades ago. He apparently served 14 months in prison, changed his name and moved into the community a decade ago. He opened his own restaurant and married the mayor's daughter. He now has two children of his own and is a member of the church choir. He also supplies the local soup kitchen with excess food from his restaurant. You call the coach who confirms the allegations, but begs you not to print the story. "It will destroy me and humiliate my family," he says. "They don't know any of this. We will have to move. Please, I paid for my crime and rebuilt my life!" But the caller who tipped off your reporter is adamant. "If you don't print the story, I will go to another news outlet. Pedophiles are never cured. This man is a danger to the community." You also learn that the caller is a rival of the mayor, who is up for re-election.

Do you broadcast the story? Why or why not?

3. Your reporter discovers that one of the most prominent baseball players in the nation is dying of AIDS. Currently, the player is mired in a deep slump and there is speculation among fans that he had used steroids in the past. The player is routinely booed when he comes to bat. The reporter learns of the AIDS diagnosis on a source basis from the player's personal trainer, who is angry at the fans' reaction. Your reporter confronts the player who concedes that the diagnosis is true, but says he has not told any of his teammates or team officials. "I have a right to manage my own death," he says, walking away in anger.

Do you broadcast the story? Why or why not?

4. Gloria Rojas is an upstanding member of her community. She is an active member of the PTA and volunteers in her church. She lives on a quiet street with her husband and three children. A fire breaks out at the home of her next door neighbor, a single mother who lives with her 3-year-old twins. Rojas hears the children scream and rushes outside and sees a babysitter and the twins huddling inside the house. Not thinking of her safety, Rojas rushes into the house, battles heavy smoke, and drags the twins to safety. A few minutes later, firemen arrive and try to save the babysitter, who is taken to the hospital in critical condition. Firemen discover preliminary evidence that someone has intentionally set the fire. Your TV reporter arrives on the scene in time to interview Rojas and meet other neighbors who have taken pictures

and video of the “miracle” rescue on their cell phones. You are ready to broadcast a dramatic story on the rescue when the phone rings. It is Rojas’s husband. “You cannot broadcast a story or pictures,” he pleads. “We are undocumented immigrants. We came into the country illegally. If the story gets out, we could be deported.” In the background, you hear Gloria Rojas crying.

Do you broadcast the story?

Do you use video of your interview and video taken by the neighbors?

Do you identify Gloria Rojas?

5. A series of arson fires has plagued your community for the past several months, with most of the arsons taking place in unoccupied homes in a new housing development that borders a controversial wetland. A shadowy Animal Rights Group called “Save the Wild” has claimed responsibility. In the most recent case, a fire broke out shortly after prospective buyers had visited the home. Your editor assigns you to the story. After several weeks, a source says he is willing to give you access to the group for two weeks, under the condition that you don’t identify its members and you don’t do a story until the two-week period is over. He says the group wants to show that its members are not “eco-terrorists,” but a cross-section of ordinary citizens. You discuss the proposal with your editor and argue it may be the only way to discover the size of the group, where the group gets its money, what kind of people are involved and how they can elude police. He reluctantly agrees. You assure the group that you will meet its terms. After a few days, you learn that the group is planning its biggest attack yet: it plans to break into the developer’s home after midnight, “liberate” his pets and set fire to it and a stable behind the developer’s home, after freeing more than a dozen horses. The developer and his family are scheduled to be out of town. The group invites you to go along.

Do you go? Do you do a story? Do you tip off the police in advance?

6. You are the editor of a major suburban newspaper and your police reporter gets a tip that two high school students have been killed at a Long Island Railroad crossing. When he arrives, a police source tells him that the bodies were found lying across the tracks in what appears to be a double suicide. By the time the reporter gets to the high school, word has spread and he overhears the names of the two students. He learns that they were both honor students. The reporter makes copies of yearbook photos, checks out their addresses in the phone book and rushes to the girls’ neighborhoods. Shocked neighbors, still reeling from the news, refuse to talk and are very protective of the girls’ families. When the reporter arrives back at the paper, he learns from a detective that the girls left a note indicating that they had made a “suicide pact.” While the reporter writes the story, your phone rings. It is the principal of the high school. He urges you to “downplay” the story for fear there could be “copycat suicides.” A few minutes later your phone rings again. It is a relative of one the victims. She begs you not to name the girls or publish their photos. She says the parents are distraught and any wider publicity about the dead girls will make the families’ agony worse. “Who cares about their names? You don’t need to print them,” she says. Your reporter argues that everyone at the school already knows the names of the students and that by profiling the families you may help other parents spot warning signs in their own children.

Do you identify the girls? Do you publish the photos? How much prominence do you give the story?

7. A famous rock band is coming to your community and you have been assigned to write a profile of the lead singer. You discover while doing background research with sources in the singer’s hometown that he had been convicted for armed robbery when he was 16 and had spent a year in a juvenile detention facility. During the course of the robbery a store owner had been severely beaten. Most people you interview for the story say glowing things about the singer,

praising him for his compassion and charity work. You wait until your interview is almost finished before asking the singer about the robbery. He admits all but says it was a long time ago and needn't be in the story. "It's irrelevant," he says dragging on a cigarette. "I was a kid. Leave it out. And if you do put it in, it's the last time I'll talk to you or anyone else from your paper."

Do you include the robbery in your profile? If you do include the robbery, how much attention do you give it? Why?

8. The 18-year-old president of the senior class at the local high school asks to meet with a reporter. She tells him that she has been having an affair with the president of the school board for the past four months. The president is married and has five children. She says she is coming to you now because the president lied to her and said he was going to leave his wife. He also said he was going to get her a job at his company, but then reneged. She says she has credit card receipts to prove the affair, as well as photos of the two of them walking hand-in-hand on the beach. You call the president who adamantly denies the affair. "She a liar," he says. He says the credit card receipts are "obviously forged." He claims the photos must be the "work of a creative person using photo shop." He says that if you give him a week, he'll prove all of this. At the moment, he is too busy campaigning. The election for the school board is in three days.

Do you publish a story before the election? Why or why not?

9. A notorious serial killer is about to be executed. Your TV station petitions the court to be allowed to broadcast the execution live. You argue that the people of the state, currently embroiled in a fierce debate about capital punishment, have a right to see the consequences of the current law. You also argue that two dozen outsiders will be present at the execution, including relatives of the victims. The court denies your petition on the grounds that any broadcast will turn the proceedings into "a spectacle" and deny the prisoner the right to "die with dignity." One of the relatives, furious at the decision, offers to secretly video the execution on her cell phone and provide you with a copy.

Do you accept her offer? Do you broadcast the video? Why or why not?