

WNC: Highlights of 2012

Last year gave the Washington News Council a to serve its highest calling: standing up for t

A custodian at Leschi Elementary School found himself the subject of three inaccurate and sensationalized stories on KIRO News, falsely accusing him of “manhandling” children. The stories online, perpetuating the damage through the vast reach of the Internet. Without the News Council, the harm to his and the school’s reputation would have been permanent. But at a public hearing on June 16, a WNC panel determined the stories were not only false and misleading, but that KIRO had violated some of the standards of journalism.

Are we still needed in today’s digital media age?

The custodian and the entire school community came to the WNC for the opportunity to tell their story and have the WNC publicly vindicate them from wrongdoing. (See more details below.)

This case came at a time when the WNC was asking: Are we still needed in today’s digital media age?

Comment sections are ubiquitous in local and national media. Social media and computer can launch their own website and air their views. As news outlets are struggling to keep their doors open. As we began our 15th year, the News Council still have a reason to exist?

We posed this question to dozens of community leaders and members of the News Council. An online survey and follow-up phone or personal interviews. The clear answer was now more than ever.

The clear answer: We are needed now more than ever.

As the news industry continues to evolve, the need remains for an organization that stands up for high ethical standards in journalism and gives citizens a place for redress when the media make serious mistakes. Unfortunately, this still happens far too often.

Our phone continues to ring and our emails continue to “ping” with questions and serious complaints about the media. Here’s a list of the most significant work in 2012:

Leschi Elementary Community Stands Up to KIRO TV

KIRO’s stories received the largest number of complaints in the Washington News Council’s history. KIRO not only alleged that custodian Chester Harris had “bullied” children at school, but also claimed the school administration did nothing about it.

Teachers, staff, parents and the custodian’s labor union were outraged. The stories were factually wrong, misrepresented the situation and unfairly damaged the school.

Video footage – taken by a hidden KIRO camera through a fence without the permission of school staff, teachers or parents – showed Harris pulling on a boy’s shoulder, implying that he was physically mistreating the child. In fact, Harris was helping two boys who were fighting! Even the parent of one of the boys later said that he was grateful for Harris’ intervention.

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–Mike McBee

What’s more, KIRO failed to report that the station’s only two sources for the stories had a history of making false charges against the school. One had a restraining order against her from coming onto school grounds. The station also failed to report that an earlier charge against Harris – by the same sources – was found to be groundless after a thorough investigation by the school district.

When parents left critical comments on KIRO’s website, the station deleted them. KIRO also refused to respond to letters, phone calls or emails from the union, school staff, or parents. The Leschi community wanted to set the record straight and restore the reputation of Harris, a man they regarded as an asset to the school and a role model for children. So they came to the News Council.

After a three-hour WNC public hearing on June 16 at Town Hall, the News Council upheld the complaints against KIRO. The audience also voted overwhelmingly to uphold the complaints, as did members of the public who voted later online. KIRO boycotted the hearing, and failed to respond to news reports about the results. The station’s owners, Cox Broadcasting in Atlanta, also were silent.

“Our members and the Leschi School community were given a venue where their concerns were heard, considered, and ultimately, vindicated,” said Mike McBee of the International Union of Operating Engineers, Local 609, which represents Harris. “There are precious few options when one finds themselves improperly maligned by the press. The Washington News Council serves a vital function in our area for such victims as well as a critical resource for news consumers.”

More details are on the WNC’s website, including a video of the entire hearing, which was filmed and broadcast statewide by TVW.

A Community Leader Thanks the WNC

Seattle Rotary President Paul Ishii publicly thanked the WNC last October for our help when he was the subject of an inaccurate story and editorial in The Seattle Times. The story reported that an employee of the Mayflower Park Hotel, where Ishii is general manager, would not be covered for lost wages while recuperating from a gunshot wound received when he courageously helped stop an armed robber.

That was untrue: Ishii had pledged to cover employee Roberto Sandoval’s wages and benefits while he was unable to work, but the reporter got that fact wrong. The Times then published an editorial based on the inaccurate news story that repeated the error.

“It’s pretty scary to be labeled guilty in the newspaper,” Ishii said. “I felt like a shmuck.”

Ishii called the WNC for advice, then followed our recommendations to secure print and online corrections. The Times made the corrections within a few days, in both the news and editorial sections. At a Seattle Rotary meeting before 500 people, Ishii profusely thanked the WNC and also thanked the Times for making the corrections.

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–Paul Ishii

Vitae Foundation vs. KUOW Complaint Upheld

The News Council upheld a serious complaint from Vitae Caring Foundation against KUOW 94.9. In a story involving Vitae, the Seattle public radio station had failed to contact the foundation before its story aired or to promptly make corrections on air or online, the Council concluded.

The WNC first tried to mediate a compromise resolution of the complaint. KUOW News Director Guy Nelson met with Vitae Foundation representative Pia de Solenni at the News Council's office, with WNC Board members present. However, after pledging to "seriously consider" airing a correction, KUOW let several months go by. The WNC decided to proceed with a public hearing and upheld the complaint after a three-hour discussion at the University of Washington. Nelson attended and explained the station's position, but the Council's Hearings Board voted that the station acted wrongly. Audience members and dozens of citizens also voted on paper or online to uphold the complaint.

The case attracted national news coverage, including a column by the Ombudsman of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Joel Kaplan, who wrote, "I also strongly believe that the mistakes made in the story should have been promptly corrected on-air. The mistakes in this story were significant enough that the listening public had a right to know the facts."

Links to the hearing video and other media coverage are on the WNC's website.

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TAO of Journalism Project Goes Global

Our innovative "TAO of Journalism – Transparent, Accountable and Open" Pledge and Seal project is spreading across the nation and around the world. Created by the WNC, the TAO is a voluntary Pledge that anyone practicing any kind of journalism can take, then post the Seal on their website or in print. They simply promise to be Transparent about who they are, Accountable if they make mistakes, and Open to other points of view. So far, hundreds of independent bloggers, citizen journalists, community websites, college and high-school journalists have taken the Pledge and posted the Seal. Testimonials on our taoofjournalism.org website are from all over the world.

The Seattle Times' Newspapers in Education team approached the News Council in 2012 and suggested we do a 3-part series on the TAO of Journalism project. Three half-page layouts will explain how being Transparent, Accountable and Open can help boost trust and credibility. The series will begin Feb. 20, which is the third annual national "TAO Pledge Day" sponsored by the Journalism Education Association.

In addition, a new Hollywood movie, "Struck By Lightning," features the TAO Seal. The WNC was contacted in 2012 by the filmmakers, who asked for permission to use the Seal in a set. The film, written and directed by Chris Colfer of the hit TV series, "Glee," is about a high-school newspaper. The TAO seal is on the wall of a classroom. You have to watch for it, but it's there!

The "TAO of Journalism – Transparent, Accountable and Open" Pledge and Seal project is spreading across the nation and around the world.

Three WNC 2012 Scholarships Awarded

The WNC awarded three \$2,000 scholarships in 2012 to Washington students planning careers in communications – journalism, public relations, or related fields. Awards are based on scholastic achievement, financial need and the quality of a written essay. This was the 14th consecutive year that the WNC has awarded scholarships, named for the late Seattle Times Editors Dick Larsen and Herb Robinson. This winners were:

Erin Flemming, 21, a current University of Washington student.

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Elizabeth Sharrard, 17, a new Seattle University student and graduate of Bellarmine Prep.

Outreach to Journalism Students at Major Events

Both John Hamer and Kathy Schrier spent significant time with journalism students in 2012. Kathy runs the Washington Journalism Education Association and organizes its annual Journalism Day at the U.W., attended by about 1,000 students.

John did two “TAO of Journalism” presentations at the September event. Kathy also helps coordinate national Journalism Education Association/National Scholastic Press Association conventions every year. The April 2012 convention drew more than 4,000 student journalists to host city Seattle, and WNC had an information table where we handed out “TAOtoos” to hundreds of students. John also spoke to classes at Pacific Lutheran University, UW Bothell, and Green River Community College. He presented the Leschi vs. KIRO complaint as a “case study” to a Society of Professional Journalists meeting at the University of Washington.

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‘Roasting and Toasting’ Chris Gregoire and Norm Dicks

More than 300 people packed a ballroom in the Washington State Convention Center on Nov. 11, 2012, to “roast and toast” two of Washington’s retiring political leaders – Governor Christine Gregoire and Congressman Norm Dicks – at the WNC’s 14th annual Gridiron West Dinner. This event has become a favorite of the fall season. It’s a bipartisan post-election bash filled with comedy, songs, videos, and pointed remarks by high-profile “toasters.” Highlights included Emcee Mike Egan’s photos of Christine and Norm from childhood through school, college and early careers – with Egan’s always funny verbal “captions.” EnJoy Productions singers sang parody songs from “South Pacific” under the direction of Kevin Joyce. Toasters/roasters included Maria Cantwell, Slade Gorton, Martha Kongsgaard, and Ralph Munro. Gregoire’s daughter and Dicks’ sons offered funny and affectionate tributes to their parents. Many people said this was their favorite Gridiron of all the years we’ve sponsored the event – which was high praise!

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In summary

2012 was quite a year for the Washington News Council – in fact, our most active ever! Now we need your help in sustaining our vital mission and excellent work in 2013 and beyond.

Please make your tax-deductible donation today! Thank you!

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