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Your Editorial Role

Editorial Philosophy

An editorial philosophy is not the same thing as an editorial policy. Your policy could be thought of as a set of rules or guidelines for decision-making, whereas your philosophy has to do with your concept of the publication's nature and reason for existence. Policy is a function of philosophy.

An instance of differing editorial philosophies, both widely represented in the Mensa Press, is that of form versus content. A newsletter of limited size that makes generous use of white space and graphics in its layout emphasizes form over content. One that uses the same space to publish as much material by as many different contributors as possible, at the expense of some options in design, shows a priority of content over form. Many editors do strive for a balance between the two.

How might you rank the following concerns in order of their importance in your newsletter?

- service to members
- showcase for local M talent
- local group image
- Mensa image
- entertainment
- friendliness
- timeliness

appearance
economy
group identity
intellectual stimulation
literary quality
M-to-M communication

These are, of course, but a few among many considerations. The point is that the relative importance you attach to each, or the degree to which you disregard any, represents your editorial philosophy. And your philosophy in turn greatly influences the effect your publication will have on its readers, whether or not you have much choice in the material offered to you for publication.

No one is going to tell you what your editorial philosophy ought to be, but you owe it to yourself and to the members whose dues support your newsletter to give the question some thought if you haven't already. Out of that philosophy come your editorial policy and style.

Editorial Policy

An editorial policy is both a tool and a defense. No editor should be without one.

It is a tool in that it can assist you to make clear-headed decisions in those inevitable borderline cases and ambiguous situations that can so easily trip you up. It also works in the interests of consistency, equitable treatment of submissions, and service to the readers.

It serves a protective function by standing between you and trouble in potentially difficult situations. A disappointed contributor's charge of censorship, for example, can be quickly defused if you can point to a policy statement that shows you are not singling him out for exclusion from print.

Hans Frommer writes that the biggest mistake he made as a new editor was publishing a sexist joke. He advises: "Adopt an editorial policy against ethnic, religious, racial, and sexist jokes or slurs."

Your policy may be as uncluttered and comprehensive as "We'll print anything that isn't downright illegal," or may be elaborate and specific. One brave editor states his position thus: "All the news that fits, we print." It may occur to you that there are some dangers inherent in a policy this broad. Likewise, with one that is too specific, you run the risk of getting trapped. For instance, if you say, "We will not publish material that is pornographic or obscene," you could find yourself embroiled in a dispute over definitions. A policy such as "We will publish any material that in our judgment would be of interest to a reasonable proportion of the readers," however, signifies an intent to be selective without restricting your options to apply it as you see fit.

One unidentified editor says: "It is evident to me that there are as many editorial policies as there are editors, and views on censorship range from vigorously pro to nonexistent. The newsletters are being subsidized from our national dues. Therefore, I feel any M has a right to be heard via his local newsletter, regardless of his opinion or his literary style. I hold that all editors should be encouraged (if not actually instructed) to limit copy only for space considerations. Mensa is supposed to be an intellectual forum where differing ideas and opinions can be introduced and discussed. The newsletters should reflect this."

Some editors feel that it is a matter of fair play to state their editorial policy in writing. At the start of their tenure they may find, too, that it is an effective device

for letting their audience know that a new editor has arrived on the scene. Other editors do not like to go on record with a policy because they do not want to limit their freedom to weigh each case individually. But a sound policy should work for, not against, both you and your readers. Use your common sense to arrive at one that strikes a balance and avoids the extremes.

“I Am the Editor!”

Gordon Andersen expresses the view: “Much as I dislike some of the things I read in some publications, I’m afraid I must stand on the side of freedom of the press. My reasoning, perhaps personal and selfish, is that I would not want anyone to dictate what I put in my newsletter and I am opposed to the double standard in any form.

“The whole question really shouldn’t be necessary. After all, we of the Mensa ‘little press’ are actually more responsible to our readers than any segment of the public press. If we engage in poor journalism, we can be disposed of very quickly since we are either elected or appointed to the job.

“Editors should take an occasional objective look at their publication. It should contain a wide variety of items that may sometimes be of no interest whatever to the editor personally. This is perhaps the most difficult task an editor faces. It is, however, not incumbent upon the editor to create articles or features in which the editor has no personal involvement. If some readers want a particular feature or column, it is up to them to contribute the material and for the editor to edit and publish.”

An unnamed editor says: “Norm Pos very succinctly states my own editorial position, which is: I AM THE EDITOR! This means that I will print only material that suits my personal taste or that I think suits the tastes of my readers. In effect, I offer myself and my publication, bound together as a total package, to my readers. They are free to accept or reject that package. So far, there are no indications that anyone is dissatisfied. If enough readers did not like the package, they could easily appoint a new editor—with no objections from me.”

An editor is not required to explain or defend his judgments—or to apologize for them, unless he has committed some truly awful gaffe. In fact, attempting to explain your decisions to your readers and your contributors is likely to get you into more trouble than you bargained for. But it is not a very good idea to announce your autonomy to them in so many words. Be tactful. Practice it—but don’t proclaim it.

The Prima Donna Syndrome

Lya Korda says, “You as editor are an important treasure to your local group, unless you think so too.”

Sad to say, not all editors retain a becoming modesty, having once got over the shock of being treated as a minor celebrity. Some develop an exaggerated sense of their own importance, to the detriment of their newsletters and consequently of their groups. If you ever catch yourself letting vanity get the better of your good judgment, pull yourself up sharp and take a cold, hard look at what you’re really doing. Being a prominent frog in the Mensa pond does not amount to a splash in the real world.

One sign of losing your perspective is taking a pig-headed stance on an issue, getting into squabbles with officers or contributors or otherwise throwing your weight around. You should be the first, not the last, to know when it’s time to look about for a new editor.

Style

In this context, let's think of editorial style as the editor's conduct in print: not only his presence or absence on the page but the way he handles the material he elects to publish.

Profile

There are two basic alternative styles the editor can adopt, with any number of variations: high profile and low profile. The editor's personality is, or should be, the chief determinant; the size and nature of the group are also factors to consider. Many editors feel very strongly that one style or the other is the *right* one, but either one can work very nicely if the editor has the personality for it.

The high-profile editor is visible on the page. He inserts editorial comments, prints replies to letters he publishes, reflects his personal tastes and preferences in his selections, and sometimes weaves all contributions into a narrative fabric of his own. An editor with a warm, outgoing personality that shows through in print often creates a friendly, small-town atmosphere in the newsletter that makes readers feel at ease. At its best, particularly in small groups, this style can have a positive effect on the newsletter and on the group as a whole. At its worst, it creates a suffocating sense of domination by a single individual, discouraging participation and driving the group into stagnation.

The low-profile editor strives for transparency. His personality may be just as strongly felt on the page, but you can't see it. He uses subtle devices, such as placement and juxtaposition, to influence the way an item is received, or simply lets the material speak for itself. At its best, this style places the contributors in the limelight and permits the members to feel that the publication really is their own. At its worst, it fosters a sense of aimlessness and colorlessness in the publication. The low-profile editor can never give his readers a feeling of personal welcome and rapport that characterizes the most successful products of the visible editor; but the transparent editor can never be guilty, either, of the worst lapses that the high-profile editor can commit.

Harper Fowley recommends: "Keep your newsletter a little on the impersonal side—it comes from the local group via the editor; it is not a personal letter from you. Change salutations from 'Dear Joe' to 'Dear Editor.' Say 'we' instead of 'I.'"

Dick Amyx writes: "A lot of (mostly little mag) editors seem to feel compelled to adopt a cutesy-wutesy-folksy tone in their writing. Ecch!

"The editor ought to remain as far in the background as possible. His comments, when warranted, should serve to inform or clarify, not just to have the last word.

"The paper should *not* be written by the same few every month—that's how an appearance of cliquishness develops."

Another editor says: "It should be stressed that a Mensa local newsletter is not a monolithic concept. Each group is different. Each newsletter should be. An editor needs to gauge the essence of his group and reflect it."

Tone

One editor states, "The newsletter should project a positive, active image, report news and activities of the group; remember, it is sometimes the only thing every member will see."

Bill Wilday suggests: "Don't print items (by yourself or by anyone else, if you can control the officers' statements) lamenting poor turnout—make it all sound like fun,

fun, fun! Nonattenders should be made to feel, implicitly, that they're missing something good, not that we're desperate without them."

According to Rod Vickers, "The newsletter is the vehicle by which the active members are tied together. The better it is, the more active members there will be. Its voice should be positive, complimentary, challenging, colorful, stable, joyful, cogent, clever, attentive, intellectual, facetious, passionate, deliberate, inoffensive, and forgiving.

"Attractive notices of coming events are easier to write if you know who the speaker is, how he was talked into stating his views at a meeting, who decided he was an expert, what he is going to talk about, how to spell at least his surname, and what the subject is well enough to look it up in the dictionary.

"Reporting on past meetings should sound good enough to make those who missed wish they hadn't, but close enough to reality so that those who did attend can recognize the event."

The Local Secretary and You

The relationship of the editor to the local secretary is in large part defined by the bylaws of the particular local group. The appointed editor serves at the pleasure of the locsec or executive committee; the elected editor has the mandate of the group's members and is answerable to them. Under either arrangement, the editor must have a working relationship with the local secretary (and any other local group officers) and must also be responsible to the membership.

Ultimately, however, the editor is personally responsible for what appears in the newsletter and is obligated to exercise good judgment as to what is published.

It is a myth that the editor is required to publish the locsec's remarks unedited. There is such a custom, rooted in both wisdom and common sense, and most editors do follow it. It represents a reasonable safeguard against biased reporting to the membership. But there is no such rule unless the particular local group's bylaws have made it a rule.

Under normal circumstances it is a good policy, as well as a courtesy, to let the locsec's remarks stand as written. License to make minor editorial corrections aimed at sparing the writer embarrassment in print is best left as a matter of private understanding between a particular locsec and editor.

Circumstances do arise, however, in which an editor's best judgment would weigh against following the custom. In those cases, the most desirable course would be to resolve the difference directly with the locsec before publication; another alternative would be referral of the question to a local, regional, or national arbiter. Editors are, as always, free to do as they see fit without consulting anyone, but they should be prepared to take the consequences, which could mean dismissal from office or could result in battles in which all are losers.

The M Editor's Ten Commandments

by Beth Sample

1. You will not consider the newsletter as your personal property; it belongs to the local group, and your own writing should be printed only when there is insufficient original, quality material contributed by others.
2. You will not complain in print about your time spent on M matters or how unappreciated you are.
3. You will not beg for contributions; rather, you will print interesting, controversial material that evokes commentary.
4. You will state the source of even the smallest squib in your newsletter, whether taken from another publication or given to you orally or in written form by a contributor.
5. You will not turn the local newsletter into a gossip sheet; members' personal matters (including your own) are of interest to a minuscule number of readers and have very little literary value.
6. You will not berate the membership in print for its failure to attend M affairs; rather, the local group should attempt to provide the membership with activities that interest them enough to close that book, lock the front door, and come out to your meetings or parties.
7. You will refrain from printing material that crosses the line from "controversial" to "obscene" or "tasteless"; do not deliberately offend your readership.
8. You will not use the newsletter to launch personal attacks on members or officers with whom you disagree; the newsletter, however, should be used as a vehicle for informing the local group of the actions of officers that have a direct bearing upon Mensa as a whole. Find that fine line in between and stick to it.
9. You will not refuse to print serious endeavors that contain subject matter or a point of view with which you disagree; your personal religious or political views should not be used as criteria for the merit of an article.
10. You will remember at all times that YOU are the only link between the local establishment and many local members who never attend activities; it is up to you to present local (and national and international) Mensa in the shiniest light possible, consistent with honesty and realism.

The Members and You

Being There

When the locsec chairs a meeting, he can see his audience right there in front of him, registering a response to what he says. The editor, especially one who works alone, sometimes wonders if he even has an audience. He sends his work out into the great void and very little may come back. Now and then he may forget just how public his job is—and how critical to the health of the group.

If you find yourself thinking what a lonely job you have and doubting whether anyone is even out there, try this: look at the membership printout for your group and single out the names of several members you don't know, maybe names you've never even seen before. Imagine them going to their mailboxes each month and picking up the latest issue of your newsletter. Whether they merely glance at it or sit right down to read it from cover to cover, they are holding in their hands a copy of the very material you labored over late into the night—for them. The odds are that they know who *you* are.

Don't ever fool yourself into thinking that they owe it to you to make your job worthwhile or justify their continuing membership. There is no excuse for the lectures whose messages boil down to: "You must perform in certain ways as members in order to satisfy ME." There is only one qualification for belonging to Mensa, and that isn't it.

Demands

Because of your prominent position in the group, you will find that some members expect a good deal of you. Most members will probably be quietly grateful that you are doing the job, if they think about it at all, and wouldn't dream of imposing on you in any other way. But there are bound to be a few who think they own you—including some who persist in imagining that you are a paid employee of the group—and who make unusual demands. Any veteran editor can undoubtedly entertain you with tales of midnight phone calls from people who wanted all sorts of things that could in no way be termed editorial. You will learn how to handle such cases as gently as possible without letting people take unfair advantage of you. Diplomacy under duress is one of the hallmarks of a good editor.

Cathy Humble says: "Mensa often attracts pretty kooky people. Locsecs and editors have a higher profile than other members of the group. The kooks tend to call the editor for information or just plain relief from their loneliness. Three or four people here in Portland do this with me. One wants me to go through the card file and tell him phone numbers of eligible females. Another would ramble for hours about his problems if I would let him. Where do you draw the line between interesting, unusual nonconformists—and kooks? But an editor is likely to feel the line being drawn instinctively after some phone calls. An editor needs to develop a sixth sense about this, and learn how to say 'no' or 'I am busy' or 'bug off,' kindly but effectively."

What May Be Asked of You

Publication

RG and AG Publicity

Most, if not all, groups hosting gatherings or other special events send promotional materials to editors and request space. Some take the trouble to offer camera-ready copy, perhaps even in several sizes for various formats. Whether to print them or not is entirely up to you. You may run all, or none, or only those for neighboring groups, or only those that look the nicest, or use any other system that occurs to you. There are no rules about giving space to other groups' ads. Some editors do notice who prints their groups' ads and who doesn't and make an effort to return the favor if the occasion arises.

SIG and Other Promotional Items

An editor is free to grant space to support any Mensa effort he chooses, whether requested to or not. Some SIGs ask for mention in local newsletters or send camera-ready ads. Some groups offer merchandise for fund-raising purposes. An editor's cooperation is a voluntary, discretionary courtesy.

Memos from National

You will occasionally hear from Margot, Rita*, or members of AMC with messages for your readers. These people do not ask for publication in the newsletters unless they have good reason. Frequently the reason involves the relatively short lead time of the newsletters and/or the consistent evidence that most members pay close attention to their local publications. Most editors treat these requests as high-priority items.

Do not assume, however, that everything you receive with a Mensa logo on it is official business. Many people throughout the organization have Mensa stationery of one sort or another, often adapted from AMC letterhead or memo forms for local group, SIG, or personal use. This is an entirely legitimate practice.** Now and then, however, an editor has been unintentionally misled into thinking that a message received in this form came from a national officer or other personage. If in doubt, check the list of officers and staff that appears in every *Bulletin*, or call Margot's or Rita's office for verification.

Service

Input to AMC Members

From time to time AMC may address the editors, locsecs, and/or various other key members, requesting input on some matter that is under consideration. Those who respond have an opportunity to influence the decision-making process at the national level.

* The late Margot Seitelman was the Executive Director, and the late Rita Levine was the Local Groups Secretary. Wherever their names appear, substitute "the national office."

** This was true in 1982, but in 2002 it is subject to verification.

Input to the National Nominating Committee

In drawing up its list of nominees for AMC office, the NomCom makes an effort to obtain recommendations and comments from as many responsible members as possible. Editors and locsecs are important contributors to their task of information-gathering and evaluating.

Service on National Committees

Many study committees and action committees formed by AMC include non-AMC members. Editors are among those considered for such appointments, which serve in part as a testing ground for other possible national-level responsibilities.

Politics

Politics can be a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't dilemma for editors. Your obligation to inform your readers of circumstances that can affect them may conflict with your desire to remain impartial and give all sides a fair hearing. An editor who takes stands on Mensa's political issues runs the risk of exposing himself to criticism, getting into unpleasant squabbles or full-scale warfare, and possibly embarrassing himself with uninformed statements. An editor who carefully avoids political matters takes the chance of depriving his readers of important information. You must weigh the choices for yourself. Bear in mind, though, that for some, Mensa politics is a very serious business; for some, it is a favorite game; and for some, it is the height of foolishness.

In all cases, remember that political material is best exempted from your customary editorial treatment. Don't take chances.

Local

The newsletter will be the major—for many, the only—source of information about local group elections. Do be especially careful how you handle yourself if you or someone close to you is running for office.

National

In recent years many local publications have devoted space to matters pertaining to national elections. Whether or not you are acquainted with Mensa's political history, be aware that as an editor you possess a great deal of influence over the outcome. In general this is a healthy thing for Mensa.

Candidates for national office may send you campaign literature and ask you to publish it. You are free to do so, whether or not you wish to endorse the candidate (a choice that does not, by the way, jeopardize your qualification for subsidy from National). It is good policy to publish literature from all candidates for a given office if you publish any. You are not under obligation to publish any, however; full campaign and biographical statements will be published under the auspices of the Election Committee, as mandated by the American Mensa bylaws.

By the same token, no candidate is obliged to send campaign materials to editors. Doing so is a strategy employed by some; it is not even a custom.

International

International Mensa affairs may seem very remote to you; they do to most members. Mensa is an international organization, however, and decisions made at the international level do affect members at least indirectly, through the uses of their dues. Attention to international Mensa concerns would not be out of place in any local publication.

When You Retire

It is the responsibility of the local secretary to notify Local Groups Secretary Rita Levine, preferably in writing (there are forms for this, available from Rita), of a change in editorship of the local group's newsletter; as outgoing or incoming editor, you may wish to communicate with Rita yourself by way of confirmation of names, addresses, and dates. SIG coordinators should notify the Groups Officer*.

Most groups dread the prospect of replacing their editors and want them to continue as long as possible. But sooner or later nearly every editor chooses to relinquish the post. You feel yourself growing stale, you have your eye on another office, you burn out, your priorities alter and you want to reapportion your time and energies. Occasionally change or restlessness in the group stimulates interest in a new editorial approach.

Whether you resign or serve out a designated term, whether you turn over your files to an elected or appointed successor, you will do both yourself and your group the greatest service by making the transition as smooth as possible. Once in a while ill feelings do accompany the process, but there is nothing to be gained by departing gracelessly, subjecting the readership to a published list of grievances, or denying your successor the best advantage in commencing his service to the group. Most outgoing editors retire with mixed feelings, experiencing a twinge of regret as they deliver their final issue to the printer but yielding to their successor with undisguised relief.

The luckiest incoming editors are those who have an opportunity to learn the ropes from their predecessor. Your successor will undoubtedly wish to make changes, introduce new features, and otherwise establish a style of his own, just as you did when you were new. But he may welcome the opportunity to train with you on your final few issues in order to gain an understanding of the basics before he takes over. Naturally you are also expected to transfer to your successor all pertinent materials—records of exchanges with other newsletters, subsidy applications, unused copy and art, files of back issues, supplies and equipment that belong to the group, and so forth. If no successor has been designated by the time you conclude your tenure, you should turn everything over to the local secretary or coordinator responsible for the group.

The following is a selection of editors' responses to the question **"When it comes time for you to train your successor, what one thing will you stress above all else, and why?"**

Rule number one: get it out on time! Second, don't let anyone else try to tell you what to print or how to put your rag together; it's your duty and your responsibility—you were elected to use your best judgment, so why rely on someone else's?

—Phillip H. Snaith

* Now SIGs Officer.

I would stress objectivity. In Mensa, this seems to be the biggest issue. The editor must be fair and even-handed. Not doing this would be one of the few ways to get into real trouble. (The other most obvious trouble would be going way over budget. The publisher would, I hope, stop this before it went too far.)

—Bob Abrahams

Personal contact with members. The only way to get material is to point a finger and say, “You give me an article on the Fair and Creeding of Numsats by the tenth of May.” You have to know that Murgatroyd Philpot is a Numsat expert in his spare time *and* can put together a coherent sentence. This takes a lot of time at functions.

—Katherine DeWitt, Jr.

I would stress neatness and accuracy, to the utmost possible—no strikeouts or sloppy typing and spelling. Too, a newsletter does need some artwork and open space, no matter what the subject matter, so as to be appealing and easy to read. When you ask for contributions from readers, it is important to use them and show that you appreciate them! Very important to answer all correspondents promptly; you can’t survive without goodwill.

—Joy McLeieer

Remember that the newsletter is read by people different from himself: by children, old people, the devout, the inhibited. While the editor should not try never to offend anybody, he should always balance the damage of possible offense against the value of the copy.

—Donald R. Jacques

Importance of SIG, nurture dialogue, *have fun*.

—Glen Lambert

My primary advice would be to keep in mind that your newsletter is for the members of your *local group*—not for other editors, not for AMC. They are coincidental readers. SERVE YOUR LOCAL GROUP FIRST, LAST, AND ALWAYS.

—John T. Travis

Print as much of local talent as possible within the confines of your criteria. Mention members’ names—they love it. Publish *good* pictures when possible. Keep the copy clean—look at the final paste-up for balance. Get plenty of picky, picky proofers.

—Cynthia Fisher

Make up your own mind. Don’t attach too much importance to anyone else’s opinion—including mine.

—Meredy Amyx

Attend as many local functions as possible, get to know your fellow Ms as best you can. They’re your best source of inspiration, criticism, and support.

—Robert “Hagar” Hartman

Get as many people involved as possible. Try to find a better way of Lick-&-Sticking!

—Nancy Reller

Be fair and stand firm. Don’t let the bastards get to you.

—(name withheld)

