Mixed Message Media: Girls' Voices and Civic Engagement in Student Journalism

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Abstract

Prior research has illustrated the benefits of media literacy and production programs for girls' self-expression and civic engagement. This study examines whether formal high school journalism programs can be similarly beneficial. A survey of 461 high school journalists shows that girls want to use student media to address serious topics that can contribute to their civic development. But school employees also tell girls more often than boys not to cover sensitive issues in the student media, and girls are more likely than boys to acquiesce to such requests. Girls will not glean the full benefits of journalism education until such disparate treatment is addressed. Journalism educators and school administrators may profit from the feminist pedagogical approaches developed in out-of-school media-focused programs in which girls have demonstrated significant willingness to express themselves and are unencumbered to do so.

Keywords

censorship, civics, education, engaged citizenship, journalism, media production, pedagogy

Introduction

Evidence accumulating at the intersection of girlhood studies and media studies suggests that it is developmentally beneficial for girls to engage in the creation of self-expressive media (Blair et al. 2010; Kearney 2006; Moscowitz and Carpenter 2014; Vargas 2009). Studies examining girl-

centered media literacy and production programs describe spaces in which girls with women mentors critically evaluate media, develop production skills, and create media imbued with girls' voices. Programs like these can foster an engaged citizenship among participating girls (Caron 2011).

The educational programs discussed in this literature often operate outside of formal school structures: the participants meet outside school hours, often not on school grounds, and the programs are not led by school personnel. But there are also school-sponsored and curricular settings in which girls can use media to develop and exercise their voices and practice civic engagement. One school subject suitable to providing such a platform is journalism, as are related co-curricular and extracurricular hands-on activities like the production of the school newspaper, yearbook, or news website.

This article presents formal, school-sponsored journalism education programs as a potentially valuable yet imperfect setting for the development of girls' voices and their civic engagement. Civic engagement encompasses the actions citizens take to participate in society, including advocating for social change, contributing time and resources to civic organizations, and voting. We discuss the nature and ideal outcomes of school-sponsored journalism education and explain the legal framework that supports restrictions on student expression. We then present survey data that illustrates that journalism education can nurture girls' sense of civic engagement, but also that school officials often impede girls from realizing journalism education's full potential.

Journalism Education

There are valid reasons for establishing out-of-school, girl-focused media literacy and media production programs. Girls who participate in out-of-school programs may be more willing to express themselves within these programs than in conventional classroom settings. By

functioning outside school structures, these programs avoid the in-school norms that often

marginalize adolescent girls like, for example, teachers' outsize focus on disruptive boys and the

expectation that girls act nicely, silently, and obediently (Brown 1998). Such programs may be

especially beneficial for girls from disadvantaged and immigrant backgrounds whose economic

and cultural alienation may complicate the development of well-integrated self-identities and

self-expressions (Brown 1998; Mann 2004; Vargas 2009). Out-of-school programs also allow

facilitators greater pedagogical freedom than do school-sponsored settings (Moscowitz and

Carpenter 2014), perhaps resulting in more authentic relationships between girls and their

mentors.

Formal journalism education, however, also offers a unique environment that can affirm

girls' experiences, help girls critically evaluate and produce media, and nurture girls' civic

engagement. Because journalism education is incorporated within the US education system, it

enjoys institutional support in many schools, including being allocated designated teachers,

instructional space, and technology; each year thousands of girls in the United States participate.

More than 90 percent of secondary schools in the United States offer curricular or extracurricular

journalism opportunities, and approximately 18 percent of US students in grades 10 to 12 take

journalism classes or produce student news publications or digital media (Bobkowski et al. 2012,

2016). While white students are more likely than non-white students to participate in for-credit

journalism programs, there are no racial or ethnic discrepancies in extracurricular journalism

program participation (Bobkowski et al. 2016).

Many students enter journalism through self-selection, aiming to develop their aptitude

for self-expression, writing, or engagement. While some students may pursue journalism for the

benefit of their college applications or application portfolios, many have less instrumental

motivations (Lightman and Hoechsmann 2014). Former participants in one out-of-school

journalism program recalled being motivated by the ability to effect change by writing to a large audience about issues and ideas that mattered to them (Lightman and Hoechsmann 2014). National US data shows that students who end up participating in journalism start out with higher grades and higher self-efficacy in English, and some are also more involved in school activities than non-journalists (Bobkowski et al. 2016).

In numerical terms, journalism classrooms are dominated by girls and women. National US figures show that in the graduating class of 2004, 68 percent of high school journalists were female and that, accounting for other factors, female students were twice as likely to take journalism as their male counterparts (Bobkowski et al. 2016). Journalism teachers also tend to be female, with a 3:1 or 4:1 female-to-male ratio among them (Dvorak et al. 1994; Filak et al. 2009). There is considerable potential, therefore, for journalism classrooms to constitute the educational environments that Brown (1998) envisions, in which girls' expressions are valued and validated by female authority figures.

Although some research characterizes student journalism as merely depicting and perpetuating high school rituals and rites of passage like dances and sports (Hoffman 2005), high school journalists can use their media to address consequential issues, and thus learn how to become engaged citizens through the use of media. Journalism education can promote the development of media-focused civic skills that constitute what experts have called civic communication competence and digital proficiency (Jenkins 2009; Shah et al. 2009). Research shows that student journalists identify service to their peers about issues that matter to them as an important element of their journalistic work (Clark and Monserrate 2011: 429). Journalism classrooms can serve as safe spaces in which students identify issues that matter to them, become educated on these issues, discuss them with their peers and teachers, and learn how to communicate effectively about them to the broader community (Östman 2013). Journalistic work

stimulates the didactic practices that, according to civic education experts, effectively foster students' civic habits and orientations (Gibson and Levine 2003). These include discussions of current issues and events, engagement in service learning, contributing to how a school functions, and participating in democratic processes. Research shows that taking journalism in high school is related to civic engagement beyond high school, with former high school journalists voting more often in their late teens and 20s than those students who did not take journalism (Bobkowski and Miller 2016).

While journalism education can address Caron's call for media-making programs to help girls become "citizens despite their unachieved legal status as minors" (2011: 78), this potential often goes unrealized because school officials can limit what students communicate about in school-sponsored media.

Legal Barriers to Ideal Journalism Education

Students' ability to communicate freely about the topics they deem important stands at the core of how journalism education contributes to civic development. The issues that students find important to talk about today—wartime concerns, sexuality, drug use and so on—echo the issues that sparked past litigation and contributed to the current legal precedent on student speech in the United States.

While professional journalists in the United States enjoy robust constitutional protection, the country's Supreme Court has chipped away at the protection it initially afforded student speech in the 1969 landmark case *Tinker v. Des Moines School Dist.* (hereafter called *Tinker*). The case originated when middle school siblings Mary Beth and John Tinker and a friend wore bands of black cloth on their sleeves to school to signify their resistance to the Vietnam war. Despite the fact that there were no recorded disruptions such as hostilities or confrontations in response to these armbands, the school board suspended the students under a hastily-passed

policy forbidding the wearing of black armbands in Des Moines schools. When the case reached

the Supreme Court, Justice Abe Fortas, writing for the majority, penned the oft-repeated paean to

student speech rights: "It can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their

constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" (*Tinker* 1969:

506). Fortas articulated a two-part test that would necessitate the finding of, first, an actual

disruption resulting from the speech act, and, second, a material disruption of normal discipline

and operation of the school.

This permissive environment for student speech did not last. In 1986, in *Bethel School

District v. Fraser*, which raised the question of sexual innuendo in school, and in 2005, in the

"Bong HiTs for Jesus" case (*Morse v. Frederick*), which dealt with the alleged encouragement of

drug use, the Court allowed administrators wide latitude in censoring student expression.

However, it was in 1988 that the Court came down with arguably the most devastating opinion

for student speech freedom. In 1998, in *Hazelwood School Dist. v. Kuhlmeier* (hereafter referred

to as *Hazelwood*), the Court said that it was within administrative power to pull articles from a

student newspaper if administration deemed them possibly problematic. Student reporter Cathy

Kuhlmeier and two other female journalists wrote a two-page spread in their high school

newspaper dealing with divorce and teen pregnancy. The principal felt that the articles were

inappropriate for Hazelwood East High School readers and ordered them removed from the

paper. Justice Byron White, supporting the school administration, wrote for the Court:

"[E]ducators do not offend the First Amendment by exercising editorial control over the style and

content of student speech in school-sponsored expressive activities so long as their actions are

reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns" (*Hazelwood* 1988: 273). Administrators,

then, can censor school-sponsored publications at will as long as those censorial actions advance

"legitimate pedagogical concerns."

Thus, two legal tests for student speech protection exist in an uneasy relationship: *Tinker*, in which there must be a proven relationship between any school disruption and the allegedly offending speech, and *Hazelwood*, in which administration is given great leeway in determining the appropriateness of on-campus student media products as long as their decisions are reasonably tied to pedagogical concerns. Laws in ten states (Arkansas, California, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Oregon, Maryland, Massachusetts, and North Dakota), and in the District of Columbia afford *Tinker*-level protections to student journalists. But research in Californian schools shows that some school officials continue to prevent students from publishing stories on certain topics despite the state law that prohibits such restraints (Amster 2006).

While the First Amendment and its associated rights are unique to the United States, internationally, Article 13 of the 1990 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) gives children the "freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds," subject to regulation for "respect of the rights or reputations of others" and "the protection of national security or of public order … or of public health or morals" (United Nations Human Rights Commission 1990: n.p.). The treaty thus blends the sweeping encouragement for student expression outlined in *Tinker* with the concerns about morality and safety that characterize the *Hazelwood* ruling. Even without formal laws the treaty's 196 ratifying nations do have legal protection in place and could adopt additional protections under the CRC's ambit (the United States is a signatory but has not ratified the treaty) but it is unclear if any countries have done so, particularly in the context of youth journalism.

While the value of journalism education for civic development lies in students' ability to voice their ideas, legal contexts that allow school administrators and teachers to curtail student speech limit journalism's full civic potential.

Girls' Voices in High School Journalism

While many girls enroll in formal journalism education, research thus far has not examined the extent to which girls aim to use student media to address civic-oriented issues, and if they do, how successful they are in doing so. Some evidence suggests that student media focuses primarily on stereotypical high school events and rituals (Hoffman 2005), and thus civic issues may not be a priority for student journalists. Therefore, the first research question we address with the data collected for this study is this: Do female high school journalists identify civic issues for coverage in their student media? We also consider three realities related to girls' journalism and freedom of expression for which we expected to find evidence in the data.

First, girls may be more likely than boys to identify issues and topics that cause discomfort for their teachers and administrators, and thus be more likely to be asked not to cover some issues in the student media. As Brown and Gilligan (1993) observe, the experiences and points of view that adolescent girls want to articulate often undermine patriarchal norms and structures. Girls also tend to be more engaged in their schools than boys (Feldman and Matjasko 2007), and so they may have a clearer understanding of the school's issues, including contentious ones, that should be addressed publicly. Girls' noises and voices tend to be regulated more strictly than those of boys (Gordon 2006). We hypothesized first, therefore, that school employees disproportionately silence female student journalists.

Second, we predicted that among the students who are told not to discuss certain issues in their media, girls are more likely than boys to acquiesce because girls are less confident than boys in how teachers evaluate their self-expression. Girls tend to be more interested than boys in pleasing their teachers in writing assignments (Cleary 1996). Girls also appear to lose more confidence than boys in their writing ability and, unlike boys, tend not to overstate their writing skills (Lee 2013; Pajares and Valiante 1999). Administrators' or teachers' requests not to discuss

something in the media may tap into girls' insecurities about having their self-expression rejected.

Finally, we considered the issues that teachers and school administrators are most likely to ask their student journalists to avoid. Prior research showed that school officials object to content that can cause discord in the school community, including divisive political and social issues, and stories that may reflect negatively on the school's employees (for example, school policies and losing athletic teams), or student behaviors (such as teen sex and drug use) (Filak et al. 2009; Nelson 1974). We expected to learn that student journalists would continue to be asked not to cover these topics. Since prior research has not considered whether girls are more likely than boys to be asked not to cover specific topics, we also examined this question in our analysis.

Survey of High School Journalists

To assess whether our predictions about girls' voices in high school journalism were accurate, we conducted a survey of high school journalists at five one-day journalism workshops that were held across a southeastern US state in fall 2015. The workshops were sponsored by a statewide organization that supports high school journalism through education and recognition programs. Four of the workshops were hosted on college campuses and one was hosted at a media company. All study procedures were approved by the human subjects committee at our home institution.

Of the 461 high school journalists responding to the survey, 361 (78 percent) were female and 100 (22 percent) were male. This approximates the general composition of high school journalism classes across the United States (Bobkowski et al. 2016).

Other than whether they identified as male or female, we did not ask students to disclose demographic information. Our survey consisted of only five questions that addressed our focal concerns. We reasoned that asking for minimal identifying information would encourage students

to write candidly about sensitive topics. Attendance information from the sponsoring

organization suggests that the attending schools represented diverse populations from across the

state. Of the 19 schools attending the largest workshop, for instance, 16 schools were public and

3 private; 11 schools were located in cities and suburbs, 3 in mid-size and small towns, and 5 in

rural areas. Overall, these schools' racial and ethnic compositions and their students'

socioeconomic backgrounds (measured by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch)

approximated the demographics of the state's student population (National Center for Education

Statistics, n.d.).

In addition to asking about the respondents to self-identify as either female or male, the

survey asked four questions:

1. What important issues or topics should be discussed in your student media?

2. Have you been told by a school employee not to discuss a topic or issue in your student

media?

3. Have you refrained from discussing a topic or issue in your student media because you

anticipated a negative reaction from the school?

4. What were the topics or issues that you were asked not to discuss, or refrained from

discussing, in your student media?

We coded the open-ended responses to the first and fourth questions. The first question

was based on our interest in whether or not the issues that students wanted covered in their media

were civics-oriented. We reasoned that any substantive issue can teach journalism students about

using media for civic purposes, but that there is less opportunity for civic lessons when students

cover only routine school events like dances and sporting events. We thus coded as *civics-*

oriented responses to the first question that dealt with issues outside of regular school events. We

identified 55 unique issue categories in students' responses to the fourth question and then

matched them to the two broad categories of censured student speech identified in prior research (that is, divisive current issues and topics that cast school employees or students in a negative light). One coder coded all of the responses to the two questions. To establish intercoder reliability, a second coder double-coded 15 percent of the responses, arriving at an agreement rate of 97 percent for the first question and 100 percent for the fourth question.

Survey Findings

The survey's results supported the notion that girls who participate in school journalism want to cover issues in their media that can promote their civic development. Of the 338 girls who answered the first question, 72 percent ($n = 243$) identified topics beyond the stereotypical content of school newspapers and yearbooks. For instance, reflecting both the service and civics-oriented nature of journalism, one girl wrote that her student media should cover "[t]opics people will be interested in, but it is important to discuss topics outside of the reader's comfort zone to inform [the readers] of current events." Another girl illustrated the potential of student media to boost her fellow students' political development; she wrote that her media should cover "[p]residential candidates and the upcoming election; how teens can make an impact on politics." These responses illustrate that student journalism can help foster girls' civic voices. Girls were slightly more likely than boys to identify civics-oriented topics (65 percent of boys did so), but a chi-square test showed that this gender difference was not statistically significant [$\chi^2(1) = 1.73$, $p = .19$].

More than a third of the student journalists in this survey (38 percent, $n = 174$) indicated that they were told to refrain from discussing some issue in their school media. As we predicted, a greater proportion of female students (41 percent) than male students (28 percent) was told by a school employee to refrain from discussing some issue or topic in their school media. A chi-square test confirmed that this was a statistically significant difference [$\chi^2(1) = 5.14$, $p = .02$].

We had predicted that among the students who were told by a school employee to refrain from discussing some issue or topic in their school media, female students would be more likely to acquiesce than male students. Indeed, 88 percent of female students as opposed to 64 percent of male students who were asked to refrain from an issue actually refrained from discussing it in their student media. A chi-square test again confirmed that this was a statistically significant difference [$\chi^2(1) = 10.26$, $p = .001$].

< Please insert Table 1 here>

Table 1 presents a list of the issues and topics that more than 1 percent of the respondents said they were unable to cover in their media. As in prior studies, student journalists were asked not to discuss divisive political and social issues, including the legalization of marijuana (16 percent), and LGBT issues and gay marriage (15 percent). Nearly one in 10 students (9 percent) said that they could not cover issues that were generally controversial, that might offend, upset, disturb, be harmful, touchy, or sensitive. Students were also told not to cover stories that suggested the school's employees or students were somehow flawed. These included stories discussing mental health and suicide (8 percent), sex and pregnancy (4 percent) dress code policies (4 percent), and teachers acting inappropriately (3 percent).

The following verbatim responses from girl journalists illustrate the restrictions with which they contend:

We are asked to refrain from discussing any topic that would shed negative light on our school even if it is honest and important.

Talking about anything religious, any sort of subject that may raise eyebrows (pregnancy rates in high schools, abortion, politics).

> We were told not to mention any of our athletic teams losing.

> We are asked to not talk about serious topics like suicides and car accidents.

> We were asked to not write about the Confederate flag. We were not to write about standardized tests that would make the school look bad. We refrained from writing about anything that required anonymity, in case we were asked to reveal names.

In all, there were no statistically significant differences in the proportions of girls and boys who were told not to discuss specific issues.

Discussion

Each year thousands of girls in the United States take journalism and produce student media in school-sponsored journalism programs. Student newsrooms can nurture girls' voices and media-centered civic skills, much like the out-of-school media literacy and media-making programs that several girlhood scholars have written about (Blair et al. 2010; Kearney 2006; Moscowitz and Carpenter 2014; Vargas 2009). Our study confirms that girl journalists take their journalism seriously and, based on the topics and issues they identify for coverage in their media, their journalism education supports their civic development. Most of the girls who participated in our survey said that they want to cover issues of importance that matter to their readers. It is through the exploration and articulation of substantive issues that student journalists can develop the skills and dispositions that support their civic participation beyond high school.

Our study also shows, unfortunately, that girls' experiences in journalism often echo their experiences in other classrooms where their points of view are sidelined and their enthusiasm for self-expression extinguished (Brown 1998; Brown and Gilligan 1993). Gordon (2006) recounts the disturbing experience of two girls in a math class taping their mouths closed to graphically

symbolize their lack of opportunity to speak. Our survey shows that school officials are more

likely to suppress girls' voices than boys' and that girls are more likely to comply when asked to

refrain from addressing specific issues or topics. Despite its potential to serve as a training

ground for girls' self-expression and media-centered civic engagement, in many cases journalism

is used to perpetuate the silencing of girls.

The issues that administrators and teachers prevent student journalists from covering

today have changed little in more than 40 years (Nelson 1974); this reflects a lack of

development in officials' pedagogical approach toward journalism education. It appears that

administrators and teachers prefer student media to highlight only the positives about their

schools thus serving as the schools' public relations mouthpiece (Thomas 1995).

Our survey shows that by choosing censorship, school officials miss valuable

opportunities to help their students explore and understand better some of the key issues of the

day. In the months and years prior to this survey, the professional media covered the

decriminalization of medicinal and recreational marijuana in several states, but 16 percent of

student journalists in our survey reported being unable to address this topic in their student

media. Similarly, while the Supreme Court's endorsement of same-sex marriage was one of the

central news stories the summer prior to our survey, 15 percent of the student journalists in our

survey said they could not report on same-sex marriage or discuss LGBT issues in their media.

The approach that these students' school officials took short-circuits journalism's capacity to

instill in students civic communication competencies.

We prefer to treat our results as a call to action rather than as a forecast of continued

disparate treatment of girls in journalism education. Both research and past history suggest that

girls will continue to fight for their voices to be heard. The legal cases in this area demonstrate

that censorship is suffered by students named Cathy and Mary Beth, and that some of them fight

against it. Journalism Education Association's (2016) National High School Journalist of the Year award similarly demonstrates girls' resilience: all the winners between 2010 and 2015, and in many previous years, have been female. Far from being victims, these women, and countless others, continue their daily battles against being silenced and/or censored.

Girls may reclaim their voices in other ways less likely to invite administrative surveillance including through zines and online sites. As Gordon points out, silencing in one area can also open up a space "where girls can concentrate … on educational achievement or on their own fantasies" (2006: 7). Not only do we not condone the silencing of girls, we acknowledge that girls have exercised and reclaimed their ability to speak in places outside of journalism. Girls are also not afraid to express themselves online; adolescent girls are the largest demographic of bloggers (Davis 2010), and they also use their collections on the online bulletin board Pinterest to express their identities (Almjeld 2015).

We call on girlhood scholars to provide better outreach to journalism educators. What have we learned from out-of-school media programs that educators should be applying in school-sponsored journalism classrooms? What is it about zines, for example, that empowers girls, and how can that be transferred to journalism courses? Conversely, what journalistic techniques could be incorporated in zine production to assist girls in getting their voices heard?

We hope to reach more than an American journalism education audience with this research. This study is about the great potential for young women internationally to benefit from doing acts of journalism. Whether those acts take place in school, after school, in stand-alone newspaper courses or as part of English or social studies curricula, the research shows abundantly how much girls can profit from speaking and writing about issues of importance to them without fear of administrative retribution. As noted earlier, the Convention on the Rights of the Child includes the right to speak thus indicating that it is a right important enough to enumerate. The

fact that today we express concern about the silencing of girls should give educators pause to revisit the ways in which their actions speak to these students.

Pedagogies that take into account a feminist perspective are welcome, as Troutman suggests, to "move feminism, via pedagogical approaches, back into the classroom, thus rendering it transparent and fully applicable to classroom populations across disciplines" (2011: 143). While Troutman applies her inquiry to media literacy, the idea of a feminist pedagogical approach to journalism education carries with it the potential to empower girls by making sure that they are heard and read on an equal footing with their male classmates. Feminist scholar hooks outlines in her aptly titled book, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, the importance of a radical, critical, and inclusive classroom that allows all to speak and be heard. She points out that teaching is performative, and that those performances "serve as a catalyst that calls everyone to become more and more engaged, to become active participants in learning" (1994: 11). Allowing girls to choose controversial topics to discuss in their own voices encourages their active participation.

Moreover, girls do not suffer being silenced only in the United States. This kind of sexism is a global phenomenon. For example, Gordon's (2006) study of girls' noise and voice evaluated the behavior of Finnish students, and Gilbert (1989) focused on Australia and the UK as well as on the United States. Toh and Leonardelli (2013) took a global look at cultural constraints on women leaders in 32 countries in a study that suggests that to be considered a leader, an individual must both self-categorize as a leader and be viewed as such by others. Charisma and intellect were two defining factors of leaders, and both require that women who aspire to leadership be heard.

Our study's limitations include the single-state nature of our sample, the workshop setting within which we administered the survey, and the small number of questions we asked. Our

findings would benefit from the inclusion of students from other states. Student journalists in

some states enjoy greater legal speech protections than do students in our survey, and journalism

teacher requirements differ among states. Also, our findings may have differed if we had

administered the survey in schools rather than at workshops. It is possible that the students and

teachers who attended the workshops are engaged in journalism at a level that is above average,

and that this resulted in views that do not represent those of average journalism students. Finally,

although our survey questions covered our interests and predictions, a greater number of

questions would have offered a richer context for understanding girl journalists' experiences.

Conclusion

We leave to future research questions of how girls' attitudes and tendencies relate to their ideas

for journalistic coverage, and the extent to which injunctions affect their subsequent engagement

in journalism. We have little data about what the actual implications of being told not to cover

something in the student media are. One possibility is that girls get disillusioned and leave

journalism, a possibility that aligns with the absence of women in professional journalism

leadership roles (Griffin 2014). Alternatively, silenced girls may become motivated to assert their

rights. High school journalists have a more inclusive understanding of the First Amendment's

free-speech rights than their peers who do not take journalism (Dautrich et al. 2008), possibly

resulting from the negotiations that journalism students undertake between what they want to

cover and what they are allowed to cover by school officials.

Contextual questions also deserve greater scrutiny in future work, including whether

adviser and administrator characteristics and experience matter in the level of protection that girl

journalists receive, and how best to communicate with these adults about the value of girl

journalists' voices. Future research also may consider issues of intersectionality. Our short survey

asked only the sex of the participants but undoubtedly other background facts such as race or

ethnicity, family socio-economics, sexual orientation, and gender identity, for instance, as well as their immigrant status (if this is applicable) shape young journalists' autonomy and how they respond to injunctions on their expression.

Bio

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Table 1

Topics student journalists were told not to discuss or refrain from discussing in the student media

Topic	Category	Percentage of students mentioning topic
Drugs, the legalization of marijuana	1, 2	16
LGBT issues and students, gay marriage	1	15
Religion	1	14
Topics that are controversial, might offend, upset, disturb, be harmful, are touchy, sensitive	1, 2	12
Politics, political issues	1	9
Negative events, anything that puts school in negative light, bad press	2	9
Related to mental health and suicide	2	8
Race and racism	1	8
Students getting in trouble	2	6
Weapons, gun control, shootings	1	6
Abortion	1, 2	5
Sex and pregnancy	2	4
Dress code policies	2	4
Alcohol	2	4
Confederate flag, "southern pride"	1	4
Teachers acting inappropriately, discip. action	2	3

Gender, gender inequality, feminism, sexism	1	3
Vandalism	3	3
Poor athletic performance	2	3
School policies	2	3
Private/personal issues	2	3
Policy on Santa Claus, Halloween (Christian school)	2	3
Academic and test results	2	3
Music, explicit lyrics, R-rated movies, music festivals	2	3
Threat toward school	2	3
Car accidents, local tragic news	1, 2	3
Rumors, gossip	2	2
Relationships, fights, drama	2	2
School governance	2	2
School rivalries and other schools	2	2

Note: Category codes: 1 = divisive current issues; 2 = topics that reflect poorly on the school's employees or students.