**Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**MVHS Social Media Ethics Case Study**

*Directions: Read the case study and spend some time reflecting on what happened and your reactions to it.*

1. As you read the case study, mark it up according to the following system:

* Put a plus sign (+) next to anything you think the MVHS staff did well
* Put an X next to anything you think the MVHS staff could have done better
* Put an exclamation point (!) next to anything that surprises you

***Background***

Mill Valley High School is a 5A school in Shawnee, Kan. The student-led staff produces a newspaper, news website, yearbook, and television broadcast, kept up-to-date online at [www.mvnews.org](http://www.mvnews.org). They launched their website, which consolidates all content from their various publications, in 2011. Their newspaper, the JagWire, has won NSPA All-American and Best of Show placing every year since 2007 and KSPA All-Kansas every year since 2000. Their yearbook, the JAG, has earned numerous NSPA All-American awards, Pacemaker awards, and Best of Show placings. Their website has also won NSPA Online Pacemaker and Best of Show placing, as well as KSPA All-Kansas, since it was launched.

***The Case***

In the fall of 2011, the Mill Valley News staff was looking forward to joining more than 4,000 of their fellow JEA members at National Convention in Minneapolis. However, as they were traveling, they got a frantic call from their principal asking them to shut their recently launched website.

Why? Because it had actually caused a school disturbance.

Then-editor Sarah Darby had recently written an editorial criticizing the favoritism shown to the football team above other school activities. Darby had done her research and cited special privileges unrelated to the sport that had been bestowed upon the team, including special purchases and requests that seemed to downplay the contributions of other groups at the school, specifically mentioning circumstances involving the band, choir and cross country teams.

Additionally, she also debunked several false rumors that had spread around the school regarding the football team, setting the record straight and pointing out that many of the rumors could have been avoided if the football team and administration had simply collaborated and been more transparent about their decisions. Finally, her article ended with an admonition toward the football team and administration, imploring them to “recognize their boundaries” and work toward treating all programs “fairly” in the future.

The staff had rarely received any comments on their articles in the past, and did not think much of posting this one on Nov. 15, 2011. Though it had the potential to cause some discussion, it was unlikely that it would cause fights or “disrupt the educational mission of the school.” However, they did not account for social media.

Within 48 hours, more than 500 comments were posted on their website, mostly from parents mudslinging one another. Many comments were filled with profanity and attacked the other commenters more than actually discussing the article in a meaningful way.

Some offered civil discussion, such as:

**“I believe that football players work extremely hard and I am not taking anything away from your season. I just feel that other sports/clubs are not treated as fairly as the football team.. I will be there in the fall cheering you on just like every other year”**

Others simply attacked, such as:

**“The problem with it being a good article is that all the facts are incomplete or incorrect. It’s ignorant. This article is going to have a lot of people pissed off. This is a direct insult towards me, the football team, and all of it’s supporters, which some of you obviously aren’t supporters. Words can’t explain how disgusted I am of this article.”**

The discussion did not stay online, nor was it simply a string of individual comments. Students and parents responded to one another’s comments on the Internet, and Nov. 16, while the Mill Valley News staff was flying to Minnesota, actual fights broke out at school.

The staff, somewhat terrified, decided to take down the website until they could decide what to do. The administration requested their adviser, Kathy Habiger, moderate every comment posted to the site from then on, but Habiger was unwilling to step in and take decisions away from her students.

After some discussion with their website host, School Newspapers Online, the staff decided to write and apply a commenting policy to the 500+ comments that had already been posted to the website. Afterward, only 265 comments remained.

***Evaluation***

2. Evaluate the positives and negatives of how the journalism staff, adviser and administration reacted in this case study.