

Memo

To: Matt Hall
From: Bob Becker
CC: Rebecca Aguilar, John Shertzer
Date: April 11, 2021, revised May 13, 2021, May 27, 2021
Re: Bylaws amendments regarding communities and elections

It has been nearly a decade since SPJ's first communities formed. There are three active communities — Freelance, International and Community Journalism, and two that never really got off the ground — Generation J and SPJ Digital. Today, the Freelance and International communities have membership rosters that rival some of SPJ's largest chapters in size. For example, the Freelance Community has 314 members. The Freelance and International communities have recruited many journalists to join the Society

SPJ communities have grown as the Society's geographic footprint — comprised of professional and student chapters — has shrunk. In response to this trend, the goals John Shertzer presented to the board last fall included creating three more communities in 2021.

In recognition of communities' increased importance, the proposed amendments codify their creation, operation, and role within the Society. Current bylaws include an entire Article about the formation, operation and demise of professional and student chapters. The only reference to communities was added in 2017, when the convention approved the board restructuring. Before that, to serve as president or president-elect, an SPJ member had to "previously have served as a member of the board of directors, or the board of the Society of Professional Journalists Foundation, been the chair of a national committee, or president of a professional chapter and also been or is a member of a national committee." Art. Six, Sec. Three. Since 2017, the president of a community can qualify to run for president-elect if s/he has served on a national committee.

The lack of official recognition in the bylaws poses two very significant problems for the communities. They do not get the headquarters staff support chapters rely on — maintenance and renewal of memberships and programming assistance; and they have no

say in SPJ governance — no delegates at the convention.¹ The lack of staff support was the biggest complaint raised by community leaders.²

The proposed amendments attached to this memo would define communities in the same way the bylaws define professional chapters, and generally would put communities on an equal plain with chapters.

There would be two significant differences between chapters and communities. The first would be that an application to start a community would be “subject to review by the board of directors to ensure that the focus of the proposed community does not overlap with that of any existing community.” The second would be that chapters are organized within 12 geographic regions, each region under the oversight of a regional coordinator. There will be no elected coordinator for communities, in response to the stated preference of current community leaders for a staff liaison.

SPJ members interested in starting a community would follow the same procedures as members starting a chapter. To be a community member, a person would have to be an SPJ national member. Each community would be allotted one delegate at the convention for every 50 community members or portion thereof. In combination, at least 10 communities and/or chapters could propose amendments to the bylaws.

Regarding allotment of delegates, I anticipate that there will be questions about how these amendments would impact chapters. Under current bylaws, every SPJ member is assigned to a home chapter, or if not a chapter member, to a home region. A national member who joins more than one chapter, initially is counted for purposes of allotting delegates as belonging to the chapter closest to the address headquarters uses to communicate with the member. For example, an Arizona Republic Washington Bureau reporter, who is a member of the D.C. Pro and Valley of the Sun chapters, would be counted in the D.C. Pro membership. That member can choose to be counted as a Valley of the Sun Chapter member instead.

These amendments would require headquarters to ask all members whether they want to be counted as a chapter or community member, and if so, which chapter/community. Any member who has not joined a chapter or community would continue to be counted as

¹ In preparing these amendments, the Bylaws Committee met via Zoom with leaders of the three communities, Hilary Niles (Freelance), Dan Kubiske and Elle Toussi (International), and Al Cross (Community Journalism).

² The absence of accurate community membership statistics is illustrative of the problem. I recently asked Caroline Escobar how many members each community has, how many of those members are also chapter members, and how many are not affiliated with chapters. She said the Freelance Community has 314 members, 197 of whom are members of chapters, and 117 of whom are community members only. According to the membership database, the International Community has eight members, five of whom are members of chapters. Dan and Elle said the community Facebook page has 325 followers, and its weekly newsletter has 425 subscribers, but they could not say how many of those individuals are SPJ members. Caroline had no statistics for the Community Journalism community.

unaffiliated in the region where s/he lives. These amendments would prevent a single member from being counted in more than one place for purposes of delegate allotment.

OTHER BYLAWS ISSUES

The Election Task Force has recommended that the board change the deadline from 5 days before the election to six weeks before the election for nominating candidates for national offices, at-large director and regional coordinator. The rationale for that change is addressed in the task force report. The nomination deadline is stated in Art. Nine, Sec. Six. The Bylaws Committee agrees with the task force that the deadline should be changed, and the necessary amendment is included here.

At the board's meeting in April, Awards and Honors Committee chair Andy Schotz requested an amendment permitting the Society to designate more than three Fellows of the Society annually. He noted that on several occasions the board had disregarded the limit set in Article Four, Section Seven of the bylaws. The proposed amendments remove the limit, permitting the board to designate as many fellows each year as it sees fit.

However, some Bylaws Committee members expressed reservations about this change, noting that the Fellow of the Society designation is unlike other awards and honors SPJ bestows for meritorious work, for service to the Society, or to professional and/or academic journalism generally. In addition to honoring designees for their distinguished journalistic careers, the fellowship entails a one-year commitment to speak on SPJ's behalf to audiences including potential new members. Increasing the number of fellows annually risks diluting both the honor bestowed and the benefit the Society derives from fellows' advocacy; and increases the burden on staff to identify and manage fellows' speaking opportunities.

The current bylaws state that new fellows who are not SPJ members will be inducted into the Society, and dues will be waived for one year. Recently, John Shertzer alerted me to a board decision in February 2020 to grant new fellows lifetime SPJ members. To avoid confusion, we propose deleting the sentence regarding the dues waiver.

In January I reported on several minor amendments originally scheduled for delegate consideration in 2020, but postponed until this year. John has asked that I consolidate my January report into this document and those amendments with the communities amendments. Those amendments are intended to fill some gaps identified shortly before EIJ 2019. They make no significant changes to the Society's structure or operations.

About a week before EIJ 2019, Michael Koretzky entered the race for president-elect, but made it clear he would not serve in that office if elected. Michael was the sole nominee for regional coordinator in Region 3, and planned to serve in that capacity.

His actions prompted two questions: if he won the race to be president-elect and refused to serve, could the board appoint someone to fill the vacancy; and if elected to both offices, could he serve simultaneously as president-elect and as a regional coordinator?

The answer to the second question is straightforward because the board and the convention operate under Robert's Rules of Order. A candidate elected to fill more than

one position can hold only one office. S/he must choose one position or the other, and if s/he fails to choose, the board must declare one of the offices vacant.

Under the current bylaws, having a vacancy at president-elect is problematic in two respects. First, if the president cannot serve his or her full term, the president-elect must fill the vacancy, and at the end of the year, the president-elect automatically becomes president. Second, because the board now has only seven elected and two appointed members, a vacancy at the president-elect position may significantly increase the workload of the remaining board members.

The bylaws permit the board to fill vacancies that may arise between elections in the secretary-treasurer, at-large and appointed director positions. If both the president and president-elect positions become vacant simultaneously, the bylaws instruct the board to choose one of the elected at-large directors to serve as president until the next election. But, as now written, the bylaws do not allow the board to appoint a person to serve as president-elect in the event of a vacancy in that position alone. In other words, if Michael had been elected president-elect in 2019, and refused to serve, the position would have been vacant until EIJ 2020, when there would have been elections for president and president-elect.

The proposed amendments would authorize the board to appoint an SPJ member who meets the qualifications for the office to fill a vacancy in the Society's second office until the next election. Because the appointee may not have been elected to any office previously, s/he would not automatically become president.

Several committee members expressed concern that it would be confusing if a person were appointed president-elect, but that appointee would not eventually become president. To address that concern, these amendments change the title of the second officer from president-elect, which implies accession to the presidency, to vice president. The amendments state that an elected vice president will automatically become president after one year, but eliminate the implication associated with the title "president-elect."

In reviewing relevant provisions, we realized that in several places the bylaws include outdated language saying appointees will serve until the next convention. When we drafted amendments in 2011 to implement one-member, one-vote, we provided for the possibility that SPJ would not hold a convention every year, and that elections would be held in late September nonetheless. These amendments bring the bylaws into conformity with the proposition that elections will occur annually, whether or not SPJ meets in convention.

We also found one place where the bylaws refer to regional directors and the vice president for campus chapter affairs. Since the board restructuring, those positions no longer exist.

THE AMENDMENT PROCESS

If the SPJ board, by motion, approves the attached amendments to the Society's bylaws, it must circulate the proposed language to all chapters at least 60 days before the opening business meeting at the SPJ Convention in 2021. In the past, staff has notified all Society

members by email of the amendments. Amendments take effect immediately after the closing business meeting if delegates approve them.