Model Code of Ethics for Student Journalists
Associated Collegiate Press

Overview

To seek truth and to publish is the two-step goal of a journalist. Despite the complexities of today's college media world, truth seeking remains paramount. To help journalists be true to this goal, newspapers, magazines, and yearbooks adopt rules and guidelines, which are often called a code of ethics, for their members to follow. The code contains specific standards of conduct and moral judgement. Some points are specific and inflexible; others may be imprecise due to extenuating circumstances. Some are based on law. Once a code is adopted, it brings desirable uniformity to some degree in the group's search for truth. The code answers questions, and reminds those who operate under it that standards of honesty and performance exist. A code of ethics is not a burden: rather, a code is a useful license to practice news gathering and publishing free of much uncertainty. The code can be used individually by men and women to measure their work. The code can also be used to evaluate the integrity of the publication as a consumer product. Readers should expect nothing less than the truth; adoption of a code of ethics by those who publish helps safeguard the public trust given to journalists.

A model ethics policy statement may be adopted without changes, but it is more likely that a staff will want to individualize the code to fit any unique characteristics of the campus and the publication. Ideally, this model will be suitable for newspapers, yearbooks, and magazines published by students. However, some of the points may be more appropriate for one type of publication than another. Finally, the realities of budgets and staff numbers may make some points impractical or impossible to follow completely. If the complete model is unattainable, a staff will want to adopt those points which are important and attainable, regardless of limitations caused by budgets and other factors. A staff should view a code of ethics as a living document.

All staff members should have a copy; it should be discussed at a staff meeting at the start of a publishing term; all new recruits, including volunteers and paid staff, should be introduced to the code as a part of their orientation. It should be revised as needs change and it should be compared to other codes for completeness. Collegiate journalists who follow a code of ethics will find the transition to commercial or non-student media easier.

CODE OF ETHICS

01 Free travel

To remain as free of influence or obligation to report a story, the journalist should not accept free travel, accommodations, or meals related to travel. For convenience, sports reporters may travel on team charters, but the publication should pay the cost of the transportation and related expenses. The same pay-as-you-go policy should apply to non-sports reporting as well, including businesses and governments. Free travel and accommodations, which are non-coverage related and which may be provided by a vendor, may be accepted if the primary purpose is for education or training and is related to the fulfillment of an agreement or contract.

02 Gifts
Gifts should not be accepted. Any gift should be returned to the sender or sent to a charity. If the gift is of no significant value, such as a desk tinder, small food item or pen, the staff member may retain the gift.

03 Free Tickets, Passes, Discounts
If money is available, staffers assigned to cover a sporting event, lecture, play, concert, movie or other entertainment event should pay for admission. Free tickets or passes may be accepted by staff members assigned to cover an event or by those attending for legitimate news purposes. Press facilities at these events may only be used by staff members who are assigned to cover the events. Free tickets or passes may be accepted by staff members for personal use only if tickets are available on the same complimentary basis to non-journalists.

04 Ownership of Books, Records, Other Products Given for Review
Any materials given to the publication for review become the property of the publication and not of any individual staff member.

05 Other Employment
Other employment must not conflict with the staffer's first responsibilities to the publication. The staffer must report any other employment to the editor to avoid any conflicts of interest with assignments or other staff, editorial, or business responsibilities or influences.

06 Other Campus Media Work
To avoid a conflict of interest, a staffer may not hold two or more similar positions on two or more campus news, public information or public relations mediums or organizations.

07 Other Off-Campus or Freelance Media Work
Approval of work for an off-campus medium and freelance work should be sought in advance of the commitment. It is permissible only in a noncompetitive medium, on a staffer's own time and should not conflict with the staffer's obligations to the publication.

08 Membership in Campus Organizations
Staffers may not cover a campus organization they belong to or participate in any editorial or business decisions regarding that organization. Staffers may provide story leads about the organizations to which they belong to other staffers. Staffers should report their memberships to their supervising editor. To maintain the role of the press as an independent watchdog of government, a staffer should not be an elected or appointed member of student government.

09 Outside Activities, Including Political
Political involvement, holding public office off-campus and service in community organizations should be considered carefully to avoid compromising personal integrity and that of the publication. The notion of the journalist as an independent observer and fact-finder is important to preserve. A staffer involved in specific political action should not be assigned to cover that involvement. Staffers should conduct their personal lives in a manner which will not lead to conflicts of interest

10 Relationships and Coverage

Staffers must declare conflicts and avoid involvement in stories dealing with members of their families. Staff members must not cover in words, photographs or artwork, or make news judgements about family members or persons with whom they have a financial, adversarial or close relationship.

11 Use of Alcoholic Beverages While on Assignment

Even though a staffer may be able to drink legally, no or only light drinking in a social setting such as a dinner or reception is recommended to avoid any suspicion by a source or the public that the staffer's judgement, credibility or objectivity is impaired by alcohol. When covering an event where alcohol is served, staffers should not accept free drinks. Staffers should avoid the appearance that they are being "wined and dined" by any source or agency.

12 Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is: (verbal) suggestive comments, sexual innuendo, threats, insults, jokes about sex-specific traits, sexual propositions; (non-verbal) vulgar gestures, whistling, leering, suggestive or insulting noises; (physical) touching, pinching, brushing the body, coercing sexual intercourse, assault. This conduct can be called job-related harassment when submission is made implicitly or explicitly a condition of employment, a condition of work-related assignments, compensation and other factors, and if such conduct interferes with the staffer's performance or creates a hostile, intimidating or offensive work environment. Sexual harassment is prohibited. A staff should establish a procedure to report any harassment claim. That procedure should include two alternate methods of reporting information on how the claim will be investigated, and what will be done to correct the situation if it is real harassment. A staff meeting that includes a discussion of sexual harassment and working conditions is recommended at the start of each publishing term.

13 Plagiarism of Words, Art, Other

Plagiarism is prohibited and is illegal if the material is copyright protected. For the purpose of this code, plagiarism is defined as the word-for-word duplication of another person's writing and shall be limited to passages that contain distinctively personal thoughts, uniquely stylized phraseology or exclusive facts. A comparable prohibition applies to the use of graphics. Information obtained from a published work must be independently verified before it can be reported as a new, original story. This policy also forbids lifting verbatim paragraphs from a wire service without attribution, or pointing out that wire stories were used in compiling the story.

14 Fabrication of Any Kind

The use of composite characters or imaginary situations or character will not be allowed in news or feature stories. A columnist may, occasionally, use such an approach in developing a piece, but it must be clear to the reader that the person or situation is fictional.

15 Electronically Altered Photos

Electronically altering the comment of photos for news and general feature photos is not allowed. Content may be altered as a special effect for a limited number of features if the caption or credit line includes that fact and if an average reader would not mistake the photos and stories to be truthful.

16 Photo Illustration

Set-ups or posed scenes may be used if the average reader will not be misled or if the caption or credit line tells readers that it is a photo illustration.

17 Use of Photographs of Victims of Accidents, Fires, Natural Disasters

Photos have a tremendous impact on readers. The question of privacy versus the public's right to know should be considered. The line between good and bad taste and reality and sensationalism is not always easy to draw. Care should be taken to maintain the dignity of the subject as much as possible without undermining the truth of the event.

18 Reporting Names, Addresses of Crime Victims

Staffers need to know the state laws that govern the publication of the names of rape and sexual assault victims are not published; however there is a trend to ask rape victims to go to publication. Victims of non-sexual crimes may be identified, but the publication has a responsibility to give some protection to the victim such as giving imprecise addresses. With the exception of major crimes, an arrested person is not named until charges are filed.

19 Cooperation with Law Enforcement, Government, College Administration

To be an effective watchdog on other agencies, a publication must remain independent. The publication should not take over any of the duties of any outside agency; cooperation or involvement in the work of these agencies should be restricted to what is required by law. Staffers should know any freedom of information, open meetings and shield laws that apply to their work. If a staffer thinks any public authority is interfering with the staffer's functions as a journalist, the incident should be reported to the editor.

20 Scrutiny of a Public Person's Life

Conflicts exist between a person's desire for privacy and the public good or the public's right to know about a public person's life. Persons who freely choose to become public celebrities or public servants should expect a greater level of scrutiny of their life than a private person, even a private person who suddenly is involved in a public situation. Staffers should make judgments based on the real news value of the situation, common sense and decency. Reporters and photographers should not badger a person who has made it clear that he or she does not want to be interviewed or photographed. One exception is those who are involved in criminal activity or in court. Publishing intimate details of a person's life such as their health or sexual activities, should be done with extreme care and only if the facts are important for the completeness of a story and reflect in a significant way upon the person's public life.

21 Profane, Vulgar Words, Explicit Sexual Language

The primary audience of college publication is adults. Profane and vulgar words are a part of everyday conversation, but not generally used for scholarly writing. During the interview stage of news gathering, staffers will encounter interviewees who use words viewed as vulgar and profane. The staff may publish these words if the words are important to the reader's understanding of the situation, the reality of life, or if the words help establish the character of the interviewee. The staff may decide to limit references to prevent the vulgar or profane language from overshadowing the other, more important facts of the story. Profane or vulgar words are not acceptable for opinion writing. Though they may be vulgar or profane, individual words are not obscene. Explicit language, but not vulgar street language, describing sexual activities and human body parts and functions should be used for accurate reporting of health stories and, in a more limited way, for sexual crime stories.

22 Sexist Language

Staffers will avoid sexist labels and descriptive language and replace them with neutral terms and descriptions.

23 Negative Stereotyping

Staffers will take care in writing to avoid applying commonly thought but usually erroneous group stereotypes to individuals who are members of a particular group. Generalizations based upon stereotypes can be misleading and inaccurate. In a broader sense, writers and photographers should avoid more subtle stereotyping in their selections of interviewees and subjects of photographs. Some examples of negative stereotypes: unmarried, black, teenage, welfare mothers; unemployed, alcohol-using Native Americans; overweight, long-haired, white, biker outlaws; limp-waisted, effeminate gays; inarticulate dumb blonde women.

24 Use of Racial, Ethnic, Other Group Identifiers

Identification of a person as a member of any population group should be limited to those cases when that membership is essential for the reader's complete understanding of the story; it should be done with great care so as not to perpetuate negative group stereotyping. When identifiers are used, it is important that the correct one be used. Some examples of identifiers: Hispanic, Jew, lesbian, Italian, person with AIDS (PWA), physically challenged, hearing impaired.

25 False Identity, Stolen Documents, Concealed Recording, Eavesdropping

In the ordinary course of reporting, no staffers shall misrepresent themselves as anything other than representatives of the publication. In extraordinary circumstances, when an editor judges that the information cannot be obtained in any other way and the value of that information to the readers is important, the editor may authorize a misrepresentation. Staffers may not steal or knowingly receive stolen materials. Except in situations judged by an editor as extraordinary, a staffer shall not record an interview or meeting without the interviewee's permission or the obvious placement of a recording device (not hidden) at the start of the interview, in which case the interviewee or newsmakers do not object and are aware of the presence of the recording device. Committing an illegal act to eavesdrop on a source is not allowed. State laws on the use of recording devices should be checked.

26 Granting and Preserving Confidentiality to Sources

A reporter should not promise confidentiality to a source without the permission of the editor. Confidentiality should only be given if there is a real danger that physical, emotional, or financial harm will come to the source if his or her name were revealed. The editor should have all the facts and the source's names before the decision is made. The editor should know of any laws pertaining to confidentiality and disclosure before a decision is made. A reporter should make every attempt to get the same information from another source who agrees to be named since the goal is to attribute for all stories.

27 Anonymous Sources

Generally, anonymous sources are not used in stories. Information that comes from an unnamed or unknown source should not be used unless it can be verified through another, known source. If two independent sources verify the information and both are unnamed, an editor may decide to publish the information with careful consideration of the need for immediacy and the news value of the information. The source may be identified generally as one associated with an agency to give some degree of credibility to the information (see confidentiality). The danger exists that the reader may not believe the information if sources are not given; the publication's credibility may suffer; information obtained later from a named source and verified may disprove the information given by the unnamed or unknown sources.

28 Corrections

An inaccuracy is never knowingly published. If any error is found, the publication is obligated to correct the error as soon as possible, regardless of the source of the error. A consistent location for the publication of corrections is recommended. Such a location could be on the editorial or op-ed page of a newspaper. It should be clearly and prominently labeled as a correction. A magazine or yearbook published semi or annually may want to publish a correction in the student newspaper, which is published more frequently. Clarification may also be labeled and published in the same manner.

29 Ownership of Work

Regardless if a staffer is paid or is a volunteer, the publication "owns" the published and unpublished work done by staff assignment. Ownership of unpublished work may revert to the staffer at a certain time if the editor agrees with this arrangement. The publication has unlimited use of the work. The act of voluntarily joining a staff indicates approval of this policy.

30 Contests, Honors

The publication has a proprietary interest in the material it publishes. Thus, the publication as a voting group or top editors are entitled to determine which entries will represent it in contests. This will avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest that may occur if staffers were to win or accept awards from organizations they are assigned to cover. Awards presented to the staff as a whole or to the publication, generally become the property of the publication. Individuals who win awards for work published in the staff publication may accept the award and retain ownership.

31 Five Important Questions for a Reporter

1. Why am I reporting this?
2. Is the story fair?
3. Have I attempted to report all angles?
4. Who will the story affect?
5. Can I defend my decision to report the story?

Board of Directors Meeting
March 9, 2000
Attachment AIII

SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS

Code of Ethics

Preamble

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility.

Members of the Society share a dedication to ethical behavior and adopt this code to declare the Society's principles and standards of practice.

Seek Truth and Report It

Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information. Journalists should:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
- Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.
- Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.
- Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.
- Avoid misleading re-enactments or staged news events. If re-enactment is necessary to tell a story, label it.
- Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story.
- Never plagiarize.
- Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.
- Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.
- Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.
- Support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.
- Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.
- Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.
- Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

Minimize Harm

Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect. Journalists should:

- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.
- Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.
- Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.
- Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.
- Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.
- Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.

Act Independently

Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know. Journalists should:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.
- Remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.
- Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news.

Be Accountable

Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other. Journalists should:

- Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.
- Encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media.
- Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.
- Expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media.
- Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.

Sigma Delta Chi's first Code of Ethics was borrowed from the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1926.
In 1973, Sigma Delta Chi wrote its own code, which was revised in 1984 and 1987.
The present version of the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics was adopted in September 1996.