

**THE MEDILL JUSTICE PROJECT
ETHICS BOOK**

Copyright 2014 by The Medill Justice Project

Dear readers:

The Medill Justice Project is committed to pursuing the truth through our investigative journalism—and doing so fairly, accurately and honorably. We also value transparency, which is why we've made The Medill Justice Project Ethics Book available to the public. Special thanks to Kevin Smith, the Society of Professional Journalists' national ethics chair, and committee members, Medill alumni Hagit Limor and Fred Brown, as well as Tom Cline, Northwestern's vice president and general counsel, for reviewing and supporting this body of work on journalism ethics.

Given the speed at which content spreads online, errors in fact or judgment are not forgotten. Indeed, with the rise of digital media, ethics should be under greater scrutiny. As such, I teach my students to uphold the highest ethical standards while investigating potentially wrongful murder convictions as part of the Northwestern University investigative journalism class I teach, which is supported by The Medill Justice Project. I hope this guide will serve not only my students but any journalist who seeks to understand the responsibility that comes with this public service.

In journalism, after all, we are only as good as our word.

Sincerely,



Prof. Alec Klein

Director of The Medill Justice Project

PREAMBLE

Journalism ethics are complex and nuanced with new questions emerging as digital media takes hold. The role of a journalist, however, remains quite simple: Pursue the truth and report the truth with fairness, accuracy and transparency.

The following guidelines have been developed in consultation with the Medill Integrity Code, to which The Medill Justice Project subscribes; the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, to which thousands of journalists adhere; and the American Society of Newspaper Editors Statement of Principles, standards that were originally adopted in 1922 as the Canons of Journalism. Please see attachments for these supplemental materials. The guidelines take precedence over anything to the contrary in the attachments.

GUIDELINES

I. PURSUE THE TRUTH

- Always identify yourself as a journalist. Never misrepresent yourself, wear disguises or go undercover.
- Always seek out all relevant sides of the story and give people a fair opportunity to respond to any public allegations made about them. Be careful not to spread rumors or unfounded information when you are reporting.
- Avoid conflicts of interest. Journalists should work independently and disclose any potential or perceived conflicts. Do not accept gifts or favors.

- Do not express opinion when communicating with sources.
- Do not release your unpublished findings to outside sources.
- Do not stage or re-enact news events.
- Do not shoot video or record audio of someone without their knowledge. Always gather information openly; do not use any surreptitious methods.
- Make sure the information you are gathering is accurate.
- Demonstrate sensitivity when dealing with all people.

II. REPORT THE TRUTH

- Properly identify your sources and never change names. In the rare circumstances where you grant anonymity, ensure your editor approves of the agreement before making any promises. There should be a clearly defined reason for confidentiality; motives should be scrutinized. Honor your agreements.
- Publish headlines, captions and multimedia content with caution, ensuring they do not misrepresent, exaggerate the facts or present information out of context.

- Do not express opinion in your reporting.
- Do not present someone else's work as your own. Give proper credit to other contributing reporters.
- Promptly correct any factual errors and clearly identify any updates to the public.

III. ATTACHMENTS

Medill Integrity Code

As members of the Medill community, all of our academic, professional, media, journalism and marketing communications work must meet the standards in this code.

To fulfill my community responsibilities, I commit to honesty and fairness and to not plagiarize, cheat, submit the same work more than once or present someone else's work as my own.

I further agree to avoid conflicts of interest or to identify conflicts to the appropriate individual(s) if they cannot be avoided. In addition, I will encourage those who have concerns about my work to voice their concerns, and if they are valid, I will correct my mistakes as soon as possible.

While enrolled at Medill, I accept that this code applies to my academic, professional, media, journalism and marketing communications work -- whether I am in school, on an internship or job, acting as a volunteer or in a professional/academic activity not associated with Medill or Northwestern.

Finally, because this is a community code, our collective credibility is harmed if anyone violates it. Therefore, I promise to promptly report violators of this code.

Three brief appendices that provide information about the code follow:

- a. Appendix I: Background to the Integrity Code
- b. Appendix II: The Code and Outside Conflicts
- c. Appendix III: Persons Covered By the Code

Appendix I: Background to the Medill Integrity Code

For journalism, media and marketing communications this is an era of unprecedented transformation. Changes in each of these arenas

emerge with increasing frequency and with new opportunities and challenges.

There are few factors in the digital age that are “for sure.” Nevertheless, at Medill a constant is our ability as a community to champion professional and academic integrity. With the proliferation of information outlets, work based on integrity will be even more important. That is why we are committed to learning about and living by the standards in this code.

That is also why maintaining and deepening a commitment to it is a requirement to be a member of the community and for receiving a Medill degree. Those students who live these standards offer employers who hire them a distinct advantage. Those who violate this code hurt everyone at Medill.

Appendix II: The Code and Outside Conflicts

Because it is impossible to list every possible permutation of situations that might arise, the academic, professional, media, journalism and marketing communications standards and definitions in the Northwestern University and Medill handbooks are not all-inclusive.

Therefore, I acknowledge that it is my responsibility to check in advance with the senior director of undergraduate or graduate studies or, if they are unavailable, a dean about what constitutes appropriate actions under contemporary standards or definitions. It is not a valid excuse to say, “I did not know the appropriate standards and definitions.” It is my duty to keep up with them or to ask if I have a question.

Some outside organizations where I may be involved could have higher standards than these, and those standards should be embraced. If, however, I am asked to violate this code by an outside organization or situation, I should explain persuasively that I am covered by the Medill Integrity Code and what that means. After that explanation, if I am still expected to violate this code, I will contact Medill and discuss how best to proceed. If I follow these steps, I will have the full support of the Medill community as I move ahead in such a situation.

Appendix III: Persons Covered By the Code

This code applies to everyone enrolled at Medill from a student taking a single class to those who are full time.

Violating the code constitutes breaking Northwestern's and Medill's Academic Standards. This means that violations will be dealt with and enforced in accordance with the processes explained in the Medill and/or University standards and handbooks.

Penalties for code violations range from letters of warning to exclusion from Medill and/or Northwestern University. The process for adjudicating violations is available separately as part of the School's academic standards, and it is each individual's responsibility to know them.

The 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 THE 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.

The SPJ Code of Ethics is voluntarily embraced by thousands of journalists, regardless of place or platform, and is widely used in newsrooms and classrooms as a guide for ethical behavior. The code is intended not as a set of “rules” but as a resource for ethical decision-making. It is not — nor can it be under the First Amendment — legally enforceable.

The present version of the code was adopted by the 1996 SPJ National Convention, after months of study and debate among the Society’s members. 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, 1987 and 1996.

American Society of Professional Newspaper Editors Statement of Principles

ASNE's Statement of Principles was originally adopted in 1922 as the "Canons of Journalism." The document was revised and renamed "Statement of Principles" in 1975.

PREAMBLE. The First Amendment, protecting freedom of expression from abridgment by any law, guarantees to the people through their press a constitutional right, and thereby places on newspaper people a particular responsibility. Thus journalism demands of its practitioners not only industry and knowledge but also the pursuit of a standard of integrity proportionate to the journalist's singular obligation. To this end the American Society of Newspaper Editors sets forth this Statement of Principles as a standard encouraging the highest ethical and professional performance.

ARTICLE I - Responsibility. The primary purpose of gathering and distributing news and opinion is to serve the general welfare by informing the people and enabling them to make judgments on the issues of the time.

Newspapermen and women who abuse the power of their professional role for selfish motives or unworthy purposes are faithless to that public trust. The American press was made free not just to inform or just to serve as a forum for debate but also to bring an independent scrutiny to bear on the forces of power in the society, including the conduct of official power at all levels of government.

ARTICLE II - Freedom of the Press. Freedom of the press belongs to the people. It must be defended against encroachment or assault from any quarter, public or private. Journalists must be constantly alert to see that the public's business is conducted in public. They must be vigilant against all who would exploit the press for selfish purposes.

ARTICLE III - Independence. Journalists must avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety as well as any conflict of interest or the appearance of conflict. They should neither accept anything nor pursue any activity that might compromise or seem to compromise their integrity.

ARTICLE IV - Truth and Accuracy. Good faith with the reader is the foundation of good journalism. Every effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly. Editorials, analytical articles and commentary should be held to the same standards of accuracy with respect to facts as news reports. Significant errors of fact, as well as errors of omission, should be corrected promptly and prominently.

ARTICLE V - Impartiality. To be impartial does not require the press to be unquestioning or to refrain from editorial expression. Sound practice, however, demands a clear distinction for the reader between news reports and opinion. Articles that contain opinion or personal interpretation should be clearly identified.

ARTICLE VI - Fair Play. Journalists should respect the rights of people involved in the news, observe the common standards of decency and stand accountable to the public for the fairness and accuracy of their news reports. Persons publicly accused should be given the earliest opportunity to respond. Pledges of confidentiality to news sources must be honored at all costs, and therefore should not be given lightly. Unless there is clear and pressing need to maintain confidences, sources of information should be identified.

These principles are intended to preserve, protect and strengthen the bond of trust and respect between American journalists and the American people, a bond that is essential to sustain the grant of freedom entrusted to both by the nation's founders.

© Copyright 2003 The American Society of Newspaper Editors