



The Canadian Association of Journalists  
L'Association Canadienne des Journalistes

## ETHICS GUIDELINES

*Submitted by the CAJ Ethics Advisory Committee, June 2011*

### PREAMBLE

*This document – along with the accompanying “Principles for Ethical Journalism” – is intended to help both seasoned professionals and new journalists to hold themselves accountable for professional work. While many specific questions are considered here, it is impossible to capture all potential scenarios in a document such as this. Instead, it seeks to provide examples of the application of our general ethical principles, and to help journalists apply those principles and their best judgment when faced with scenarios not covered here. Updates will be issued periodically as new issues come under consideration by the association’s Ethics Advisory Committee; suggestions for additions or amendments should be directed to the committee chair or the CAJ president.*

### ACCURACY

- We are disciplined in our efforts to verify all facts. Accuracy is the moral imperative of journalists and news organizations, and should not be compromised, even by pressing deadlines of the 24-hour news cycle.
- We make every effort to verify the identities and backgrounds of our sources.
- We seek documentation to support the reliability of those sources and their stories, and we are careful to distinguish between assertions and fact. The onus is on us to verify all information, even when it emerges on deadline.
- We make sure to retain the original context of all quotations or clips, striving to convey the original tone. Our reporting and editing will not change the meaning of a statement or exclude important qualifiers.
- There is no copyright on news or ideas once a story is in the public domain, but if we can’t match the story, we credit the originating source.
- While news and ideas are there for the taking, the words used to convey them are not. If we borrow a story or even a paragraph from another source

we either credit the source or rewrite it before publication or broadcast. Using another's analysis or interpretation may constitute plagiarism, even if the words are rewritten, unless it is attributed.

- When we make a mistake, whether in fact or in context, and regardless of the platform, we correct\* it promptly and in a transparent manner, acknowledging the nature of the error.
- We publish or broadcast all corrections, clarifications or apologies in a consistent way.
- We generally do not "[unpublish](#)" or remove digital content, despite public requests, or "source remorse." Rare exceptions generally involve matters of public safety, an egregious error or ethical violation, or legal restrictions\*\* such as publication bans.

## **FAIRNESS**

- We respect the rights of people involved in the news.
- We give people, companies or organizations that are publicly accused or criticized an opportunity to respond before we publish those criticisms or accusations. We make a genuine and reasonable effort to contact them, and if they decline to comment, we say so.
- We do not refer to a person's race, colour, religion, sexual orientation, gender self identification or physical ability unless it is pertinent to the story.
- We avoid stereotypes of race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status. And we take particular care in crime stories.
- We take special care when reporting on children or those who are otherwise unable to give consent to be interviewed. While some minors, such as athletes, may be used to being interviewed, others might have little understanding of the implications of talking to the media. So when unsure, or when dealing with particularly sensitive subjects, we err on the side of seeking parental consent. Likewise, we take special care when using any material posted to social media by minors, as they may not understand the public nature of their postings.
- We do not allow our own biases to impede fair and accurate reporting.
- We respect each person's right to a fair trial.
- We do not pay for information, although we may compensate those who provide material such as photos or videos. We sometimes also employ experts to provide professional expertise, and pay for embedded activities.

We are careful to note any such payments in our stories. (See TRANSPARENCY, below).

- It is becoming common to be asked for payments in foreign countries, whether it's for guides, to make connections, or to help a source travel to meet reporters. But it's important to question the subject's motives in such cases, and to be transparent in telling audiences what occurred (See TRANSPARENCY, below).

## RIGHT TO PRIVACY

- The public has a right to know about its institutions and the people who are elected or hired to serve its interests. People also have a right to privacy, and those accused of crimes have a right to a fair trial.
- However, there are inevitable conflicts between the right to privacy, and the rights of all citizens to be informed about matters of public interest. Each situation should be judged in light of common sense, humanity and relevance.
- We do not manipulate people who are thrust into the spotlight because they are victims of crime or are associated with a tragedy. Nor do we do voyeuristic stories about them. When we contact them, we are sensitive to their situations, and report only information in which the public has a legitimate interest.
- Journalists are increasingly using [social networking](#) sites to access information about people and organizations. When individuals post and publish information about themselves on these sites, this information generally becomes public, and can be used. However, journalists should not use subterfuge to gain access to information intended to be private. In addition, even when such information is public, we must rigorously apply ethical considerations including independent confirmation and transparency in identifying the source of information. (See DIGITAL MEDIA, below.)

## INDEPENDENCE

- We serve democracy and the public interest by reporting the truth. This sometimes conflicts with various public and private interests, including those of sources, governments, advertisers and, on occasion, with our duty and obligation to an employer.

- Defending the public's interest includes promoting the free flow of information, exposing crime or wrongdoing, protecting public health and safety, and preventing the public from being misled.
- We do not give favoured treatment to advertisers and special interests. We resist their efforts to influence the news.
- We pay our own way whenever possible. However, not all journalists or organizations have the means to do so. So if another organization pays our expenses to an event that we are writing about we say so, and this includes when covering industries such as travel, automotive, the military and foreign trade (See TRANSPARENCY, below). (There are some generally understood exceptions; for instance, it is common practice to accept reviewers' tickets for film previews, concerts, lectures and theatrical performances.)
- We do not solicit gifts or favours for personal use, and should promptly return unsolicited gifts of more than nominal value. If it is impractical to return the gift, we will give it to an appropriate charity.
- We do not accept the free or reduced-rate use of valuable goods or services offered because of our position. However, it may be appropriate to use a product for a short time to test or evaluate it. (A common exception is unsolicited books, music, food, or other new products sent for review.)
- We generally do not accept payment for speaking to groups we report on or comment on.
- We do not report about subjects in which we have financial or other interests, and we do not use our positions to obtain business or other advantages not available to the general public.
- We do not show our completed reports to sources – especially official sources – before they are published or broadcast, unless the practice is intended to verify facts. Doing so might invite prior restraint and challenge our independence as reporters.
- We gather information with the intent of producing stories and images for public consumption. We generally do not share unpublished information – such as notes and audio tapes of interviews, documents, emails, digital files, photos and video – with those outside of the media organizations for which we work. However, sometimes such sharing may be necessary to check facts, gain the confidence of sources or solicit more information.
- Columnists and commentators should be free to express their views, even when those views conflict with those of their organizations, as long as the content meets generally accepted journalistic standards for fairness and accuracy.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

- As fair and impartial observers, we must be free to comment on the activities of any publicly elected body or special interest group. But we cannot do this without an apparent conflict of interest if we are active members of an organization we are covering, and that includes membership through [social media](#).
- We lose our credibility as fair observers if we write opinion pieces about subjects we also cover as reporters.
- Editorial boards and columnists or commentators endorse political candidates or political causes. Reporters do not.
- We carefully consider our [political activities](#) and community involvements – including those online – and refrain from taking part in demonstrations, signing petitions, doing public relations work, fundraising or making financial contributions if there is a chance we will be covering the campaign, activity or group involved.
- If a journalist does choose to engage in outside political activity or espouse a particular political viewpoint, this activity could create a public perception of bias, or favouritism that would reflect on the journalist's work. Any journalist who engages in such activities – including [running for office](#) – should publicly declare any real or potential conflicts.
- Our [private lives online](#) present special challenges. For example, the only way to subscribe to some publications or social networking groups is to become a member. Having a non-journalist subscribe on your behalf would be one solution, as would be joining a wide variety of Facebook groups so you would not be seen as favouring one particular constituency. (See DIGITAL MEDIA, below.)

## TRANSPARENCY

- We generally declare ourselves as journalists and do not conceal our identities, including when seeking information through social media. However, journalists may go undercover when it is in the public interest and the information is not obtainable any other way; in such cases, we openly explain this deception to the audience.
- We normally identify sources of information. But we may use [unnamed sources](#) when there is a clear and pressing reason to protect anonymity, the material gained from the confidential source is of strong public interest, and

there is no other reasonable way to obtain the information. When this happens, we explain the need for anonymity.

- We avoid pseudonyms, but when their use is essential, and we meet the tests above, we tell our readers, listeners or viewers.
- When we do use [unnamed sources](#), we identify them as accurately as possible by affiliation or status. (For example, a “senior military source” must be both senior and in the military.) Any vested interest or potential bias on the part of a source must be revealed.
- We independently corroborate facts if we get them from a source we do not name.
- We do not allow anonymous sources to take cheap shots at individuals or organizations. (See FAIRNESS, above.)
- If we borrow material from another source we are careful to credit the original source. (See ACCURACY, above.)
- We admit openly when we have made a mistake, and we make every effort to correct\* our errors immediately.
- We disclose to our audiences any biases that could be perceived to influence our reporting. (See CONFLICT OF INTEREST, above.)
- We openly tell our audiences when another organization pays our expenses, or conversely, when we have made payments for information.

## PROMISES TO SOURCES

- We only promise anonymity when the material is of high public interest and it cannot be obtained any other way. (See TRANSPARENCY, above.) And when we make these promises to sources, we keep them.
- Because we may be ordered by a court\*\* or judicial inquiry to divulge [confidential sources](#) upon threat of jail, we must understand what we are promising. These promises – and the lengths we’re willing to go to keep them – should be clearly spelled out as part of our promise. The following phrases, if properly explained, may be helpful:
  - **Not for attribution:** We may quote statements directly but the source may not be named, although a general description of his or her position may be given (“a government official,” or “a party insider”). In TV, video or radio, the identity may be shielded by changing the voice or appearance.
  - **On background:** We may use the essence of statements and generally describe the source, but we may not use direct quotes.

- **Off the record:** We may not report the information, which can be used solely to help our own understanding or perspective. There is not much point in knowing something if it can't be reported, so this undertaking should be used sparingly, if at all.
- When we are not willing to go to jail to protect a source, we say so before making the promise. And we make it clear that the deal is off if the source lies or misleads us.

## DIVERSITY

- News organizations – including newspapers, websites, magazines, radio and television – provide forums for the free interchange of information and opinion. As such, we seek to include views from all segments of the population.
- We also encourage our organizations to make room for the interests of all: minorities and majorities, those with power and those without it, holders of disparate and conflicting views.
- We avoid stereotypes, and don't refer to a person's race, colour, religion, sexual orientation, gender self-identification or physical ability unless it is pertinent to the story. (See FAIRNESS, above.)

## ACCOUNTABILITY

- We are accountable to the public for the fairness and reliability of our reporting.
- We serve the public interest, and put the needs of our audience – readers, listeners or viewers – at the forefront of our newsgathering decisions.
- We clearly identify news and opinion so that the audience knows which is which.
- We don't mislead the public by suggesting a reporter is some place that he or she isn't.
- Photojournalists and videographers do not alter images or sound so that they mislead the public. When we do alter or stage images, we label them clearly (as a photo illustration or a staged video, for example).
- We use care when reporting on medical studies, polls and surveys, and we are especially suspect of studies commissioned by those with a vested interest, such as drug companies, special interest groups or politically sponsored think tanks.

- We make sure we know the context of the results, such as sample size and population, questions asked, and study sponsors, and we include this information in our reports whenever possible.
- When we make a mistake, we correct\* it promptly and transparently, acknowledging the nature of the error. (See ACCURACY, above.)

## DIGITAL MEDIA: SPECIAL ISSUES

- Ethical practice does not change with the medium. We are bound by the above principles no matter where our stories are published or broadcast.
- We consider all online content carefully, including blogging, and content posted to social media. We do not [re-post](#) rumours. (See ACCURACY, above.)
- The need for speed should never compromise accuracy, credibility or fairness. Online content should be reported and edited as carefully as print content, and when possible, subjected to full editing.
- We clearly inform sources when stories about them will be published across various media, and we indicate the permanency of digital media.
- When we publish outside links, we make an effort to ensure the sites are credible; in other words, we think before we link.
- When we correct\* errors online, we indicate that the content has been altered or updated, and what the original error was. (See ACCURACY, above.)
- So long as the content is accurate, we generally do not “[unpublish](#)” or remove digital content, despite public requests to do so, including cases of “source remorse.” Rare exceptions generally involve matters of public safety, an egregious error or ethical violation, or legal restrictions\*\* such as publication bans.
- We try to obtain permission whenever possible to use online photos and videos, and we always credit the source of the material, by naming the author and where the photo or video was previously posted. We use these photos and videos for news and public interest purposes only, and not to serve voyeuristic interests.
- We encourage the use of social networks as it is one way to make connections, which is part of our core work as journalists. However, we keep in mind that any information gathered through online means must be confirmed, verified and properly sourced.
- [Personal online activity](#), including emails and social networking, should generally be regarded as public and not private. Such activity can impact our professional credibility. As such, we think carefully before we post, and we



take special caution in declaring our political leanings online. (See CONFLICT OF INTEREST, above.)

*\*Note: The CAJ ethics committee is currently at work on guidelines for online corrections.*

*\*\*Note: For more information on legal implications on journalism practice see [the Canadian Journalism Project's law page](#) at J-Source.ca.*