

WHAT IS JOURNALISM?

A discussion paper by the Ethics Advisory Committee of The Canadian Association of Journalists.

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Given how rapidly the practice of journalism changes, the CAJ's Ethics Advisory Committee believes in the value of regularly revisiting the question of how we define journalism, given that a common understanding of the word is helpful to discussions about the practice and its role in Canadian society. That being said, journalism is in the midst of a dramatic transformation, one in which longstanding tenets are being critically interrogated and, in some cases, discarded. This definition is meant to capture the diversity of journalism and recognize that journalistic work falls on a spectrum of simple to complex, brief to in-depth, neutral to advocacy oriented. We hope this definition will be assessed with a critical lens and reviewed on a regular basis.

Journalism is an activity that includes

1. the pursuit of truth for its audiences,
2. an act of creation and dissemination, and
3. a particular set of methods

1) Purpose: *An act of journalism sets out to combine evidence-based research and verification with the creative act of storytelling. Its central purpose is to inform and empower people to make sense of events and issues, and to serve in their interest.*

Journalism's practitioners draw their own conclusions about the work they create independent of outside influences.

2) Creation: *All journalistic work contains an element of original production.*

Journalism is fact-based; history often shapes the context of news-media coverage. Original production includes varying degrees of research, interviewing and observation, and not always all three. The creative element may be constrained by time but still involves editorial judgment—a breaking news story may be a single photograph or verbal description of an event delivered live over a phone that, while brief, still involves the skill of selecting and ordering pertinent facts. Stories that are the result of in-depth reporting may appear months or even years after the initial

event.

3) **Methods:** *Journalistic work provides clear evidence of a self-conscious discipline calculated to provide an accurate and fair description of facts, opinion and debate at play within a situation.*

We do our work openly and responsibly in accordance with professional ethics. Doing journalism requires **some combination (although not always all) of the following:**

- A commitment to researching and verifying information before publication
- A practice of providing rebuttal opportunity for those being criticized, and of presenting alternate perspectives, interpretations and analyses

- A thoughtful use of language and imagery to convey truth while considering context
- A practice of conveying the source of facts and opinions
- A practice of correcting errors
- Publication

Conclusion: We propose that for most purposes, the above three criteria (purpose, creation and methods) create a three-way definitional "veto" — that is, all three criteria must be met in order for an act to qualify as journalism. Failure to pass any one of these tests means that the act in question is *not* journalism, and only journalists will meet — or, at least, attempt to meet — all these criteria consistently, fully and deliberately.

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