

## **ETHICS GUIDELINES**

*Submitted by the CAJ Ethics Advisory Committee and approved by the Board of Directors, November 2023*

### **PREAMBLE**

*These guidelines for both new and seasoned journalists state the goals of ethical journalism and provide guidance on how to put them into practice.*

*Ticking a single point does not meet the requirements for ethical journalism, nor are these guidelines intended to be seen as a series of hurdles. The guidelines are intended to be adaptable to different circumstances. They highlight the questions to ask, the remedies to seek, and the judgment required in applying ethical principles when faced with the innumerable scenarios that journalism presents.*

*The Ethics Advisory Committee provides updates or discussion papers as new issues arise. Please read those and contact the committee chair with suggestions for additions or amendments.*

### **ACCURACY**

Accuracy is the imperative of journalists and news organizations. It should not be compromised, even by pressing deadlines of the 24-hour news cycle. We recognize the need for vigilance regarding misinformation, disinformation, and fabrications in a world where such materials are easier than ever to create.

1. We make efforts to verify the identities and backgrounds of our sources. We also verify information obtained online, whether from social media or other websites, and check the credibility of these sources.
2. We seek documentation to support the reliability of those sources and their stories, and we are careful to distinguish between assertions and facts.
3. We strive to convey the original tone and retain the original context of all the material we collect – photos, sounds, or words.
4. Although we make every effort to avoid mistakes, we know they might still happen. When we make a mistake – whether in fact or in context, and regardless of the platform – we correct it promptly, prominently and in a transparent manner, acknowledging the nature of the error.
5. “Unpublishing” or removing digital content is sometimes used in exceptional cases where threat to public safety, legal restrictions, egregious error or undue

stigmatization of a person may require extraordinary consideration. It is an extreme measure that should follow a defined resolution process.

## **FAIRNESS**

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. Journalistic fairness is about being clear and honest with sources. We do not manipulate or do voyeuristic stories about people thrust into the spotlight, including victims of crime or those associated with a tragedy. When we contact them, we are sensitive to their situations, and report only information in which the public has a legitimate interest.

1. We strive to give those who are publicly accused or criticized the 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.
2. We respect the rights of people involved in the news, and don't refer to a person's ethnicity, culture, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, political views, socioeconomic status, geographic location or physicality unless it is pertinent to the story. We strive to ascertain and use people's pronouns. We avoid reinforcing stereotypes and negative tropes and narratives associated with particular communities.
3. We take particular care in crime stories to ensure reporting does not perpetuate stereotypes, remove the presumption of innocence or pose harm to the vulnerable. We respect each person's right to a fair trial.
4. We take extra steps when reporting on children or those who otherwise lack the cognitive ability to fully understand the consequences of media attention. When in doubt, seek the involvement of someone who does understand those consequences, such as a parent.
5. Information posted by individuals on social media generally becomes public and can be used, but ethical norms of corroboration and verification still apply. We consider the media literacy of the poster and weigh the consequences of using material posted by minors, as they may not understand the public nature of their postings.
6. We recognize that we as journalists and individuals have biases, so we use these ethical guidelines and best practices to mitigate any potential impacts they may have on the fairness and accuracy of our journalism.
7. We normally identify sources of information. But we may use unnamed sources when there is a clear and pressing reason to protect their identity, 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 confidentiality.

8. 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. 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. The following phrases, if properly explained, may be helpful:
  - a. Not for attribution: We may quote statements directly but the source may not be named, although a general description of their 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.
  - b. On background: We may use the essence of statements and generally describe the source, but we may not use direct quotes.
  - c. 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.

## **INDEPENDENCE**

Journalism seeks and imparts information and ideas that are crucial to the public interest. That role – of truth-teller and watchdog – sometimes conflicts with various public and private interests, including those of sources, governments, advertisers and, on occasion, our employers. However, ethical journalism does not give favoured treatment to those influences. It remains independent in service of the public interest.

1. We do not give favoured treatment to advertisers and special interests. We resist any outside efforts to influence the news.
2. We pay our own expenses whenever possible. When it is not possible to pay our own way, we make it clear to the entity paying our way that it has no veto or right to review our journalism in exchange. It is appropriate to explain this arrangement to the audience. Consider what you need to disclose to the audience to maintain their trust in the independence of the report.
3. We do not solicit gifts or favours for personal use, or give the impression that we do. We return unsolicited gifts whenever possible or practical.
4. At times, sources may request to see our work before it is published. If that happens, consider whether that would increase the accuracy of the report or make it vulnerable to prior restraint or censorship. Generally speaking, people with power should not have the right to see unpublished work; it may be appropriate to have a more nuanced approach with people who lack power to ensure accuracy and context. In those cases, show only what is necessary to achieve the goal of accuracy and appropriate context.

5. Columnists and commentators should be free to express their views, even when those views conflict with those of their organizations.
6. Journalists who give a platform to outside commentators have an onus to make efforts to ensure that the standards of fairness and accuracy are applied.

## **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

Conflicts of interest – real or apparent – may give rise to questions about the trustworthiness of our reporting. As journalists, we must be free to report on the activities of any institution or interest group. To do so credibly, we must disclose to editors and in some cases to the audience any material connections we have with the people or institutions in question.

1. We carefully consider our public and online involvements, because they can impact our professional credibility. Activism or public support of a specific cause could create a public perception of bias if one subsequently covers something to do with that cause.
2. We think carefully before we post, and we take special caution with language and political views online.
3. Reporters may have valuable analysis to offer in an opinion piece based on expertise developed through their coverage or their own experience. We consider in that case whether they would be perceived as incapable of fair reporting.
4. Editorial boards and columnists or commentators may endorse political candidates or political causes. Reporters do not.
5. A journalist who has aspirations to run for office cannot use the position of journalist to create favourable opportunities for election. Declare your intention as soon as possible so as to preserve the covenant with the audience.
6. We generally do not accept payment for speaking to groups we report on or comment on. However, journalists who develop expertise through their reporting experience are sometimes invited to be speakers. Payment for such expertise may be appropriate but should be disclosed to editors and in some cases to the audience.
7. We do not use our position to obtain business or other advantages not available to the general public.

## **TRANSPARENCY**

Transparency in journalism is about being clear and honest with the public about how journalism is done. Besides engaging in ethical conduct with sources, it means letting the public know about how we gather and use information, how we find, assess and

describe our sources, and the steps we may take to gain the facts and context we need in order to do reliable reporting.

1. We generally declare ourselves as journalists and do not conceal our identities, including when seeking information through social media. However, journalists may go undercover or covertly gain access to information when it involves potential illegal or anti-social behaviour, 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.
2. We indicate to sources that stories published online may have a lasting and far-reaching presence, and we clearly inform sources when stories about them will be published across various media.
3. When we use unnamed sources, we try to independently corroborate their assertions and identify the sources as accurately as possible by affiliation and status, in consultation with the sources. (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 should be revealed, while still protecting their identity.
4. We avoid pseudonyms, but when their use is essential, and meets the above-mentioned tests, we tell our readers, listeners or viewers.
5. Fair dealing and other user rights doctrines allow journalists to use material from other sources. Original sources and ideas should be credited when known. However, subject to fair dealing rights, we seek permission whenever possible to use online photos and videos, crediting the author and where the photo or video was previously posted.
6. We openly tell our audiences when another organization pays our expenses. We do not pay for information, although we may reimburse those who provide photos, videos, or expertise in some circumstances. It may be appropriate to note such payments in our stories.
7. Reporting sometimes means hiring guides to make connections or travel to sources. Such people should be treated as part of the editorial team rather than sources, and should be vetted accordingly.
8. We clearly identify news and opinion so the audience knows which is which.
9. We clearly label advertising, sponsored content, affiliate links and other third-party-driven content.
10. When we collaborate with another entity, such as an institute or an independent researcher, to produce a piece of journalism, we acknowledge that partner’s role.
11. When we publish words or images produced with the help of generative AI, we say so.

## **DIVERSITY**

Diversity recognizes the essential dignity and human rights of individuals who experience the world in different ways through their ethnicity, culture, religion, gender identity, political views, socioeconomic status, geographic location or physicality. We understand that journalism that is fair, accurate, and in the public interest will incorporate diverse perspectives. We also recognize that diversity among journalists and sources will lead to more informative, representative and comprehensive coverage.

1. News organizations – regardless of the platform – seek to include views from a wide cross-section of people, including those who have been historically underrepresented.
2. We seek to incorporate a diversity of sources across all of our coverage, not only when an individual identifies as being part of a particular group, but also when seeking expert opinion and analysis.
3. We understand that conveying one individual's or group's views doesn't accurately and fulsomely reflect the experiences of the entire community. We connect and verify with communities to ensure full understanding, to the best of our abilities, of community dynamics and the implications of our coverage.
4. We encourage our organizations to make room for the interests of all: minorities and majorities; those with power and those without it; and holders of disparate and conflicting views.

## **ACCOUNTABILITY**

We are accountable to the public for the fairness and reliability of our reporting. We offer a mechanism for people to easily contact us if they have questions or concerns. While we do our utmost to avoid errors, we are forthright in addressing any that arise.

1. We do not allow unnamed sources to use the cloak of anonymity to escape their own accountability.
2. We pursue truth in the public interest. Our responsibility is to our audience, and we make editorial decisions on that basis.
3. We avoid false balance. We do not present two opposing views as equally supported by evidence and expertise when one is not.
4. When we use photos and videos, we choose them on the basis of news value or public interest and not to serve voyeuristic interests.

### **Members of the CAJ's Ethics Advisory Committee who were involved in drafting these guidelines were:**

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