

Ethics guidelines
Pennsylvania Society of News Editors
May 2015

Preamble

The Pennsylvania Society of News Editors, in keeping with the rights and privileges granted by the First Amendment, believes journalists have a unique obligation to serve the public interest through the independent, honest and fearless pursuit of the truth. It believes that integrity and credibility lie at the heart of that mission and, in order to uphold those values and serve the public trust, journalists must conduct themselves in accordance with the very highest professional and ethical standards.

The PSNE presents these guidelines as a resource for newsrooms toward the development of their own ethics guidelines, and as a public statement of its core ethical principles.

Purpose

The PSNE recognizes that no single set of principles can address all possible situations. These guidelines are not absolute rules; they are a framework for thoughtful discussion of and decision-making on ethical issues.

Journalists should use common sense and good judgment in applying these guidelines to specific ethical issues that arise in their newsrooms, making sure decisions are appropriate, while maintaining their organization's independence, integrity and credibility.

Accuracy, credibility and fairness

Journalists have an obligation to report the news fairly and accurately. They should do so independently, free of outside influences, and aware that even the appearance of impropriety can damage the credibility of individual journalists and their news organizations.

Accuracy is fundamental to credibility. News outlets should strive to ensure the accuracy of their reports, verifying information through official sources, records, documents or acceptable reference materials.

Corrections and clarifications should be published promptly and in prominent positions, both online and in print, to maintain credibility.

Factual errors such as misspelled names or wrong numbers should be corrected in editorials, reviews, commentaries and other content involving editorial or personal opinion, just as they are in all other news reports.

Journalists should strive to get all sides of a controversial story, keeping in mind there may be more than two sides to take into account. When preparing stories involving complaints or allegations against an individual or an institution, they should seek a response from the

accused.

Journalists should not selectively edit or present facts in a way that distorts a story or misleads a reader. Journalists should strive to report thoroughly and independently, and to provide context that helps readers understand the facts.

Journalistic independence

Journalists should avoid any practice that affects their ability to objectively pursue and report the news, including special treatment for advertisers, individuals, special interest groups or the outlet itself.

Journalists should be transparent about their own interests, disclosing any connection or involvement in news stories as they arise and pursuing such stories in the same manner they would other, unrelated news.

News reports should be free of editorial and personal opinion. Content that legitimately involves opinion, like commentaries, reviews, analysis and editorials, should be clearly labeled.

All advertising should be clearly marked and easily distinguished from editorial content, both online and in print. The public should be able to readily discern between advertisements, or content controlled by outside interests, and legitimate news reports that are subject to journalistic standards.

Journalists should be mindful that news reports can be distorted, even inadvertently, through emphasis, omission, lack of context and personal or cultural bias. Journalists and their news organizations should be sensitive and open to such complaints and aggressively address them.

Journalists should put aside their personal views and opinions and not allow them to intrude on the news reporting process.

News assignments, headlines and reports should be free of favoritism, bias or personal opinion.

Journalists should avoid favoritism for advertisers, individuals, special interest groups or themselves. They should not write about family members or those with whom they have close personal relationships without revealing the connection.

Anonymous sources

Use of anonymous sources is discouraged, and journalists should make every effort to get

sources on the record. But a news outlet may decide to use anonymous sources if the information is vital to the public and cannot be obtained otherwise. An anonymous source should have first-hand knowledge of the information provided or be in a position to know the facts. Ideally, a second, independent source should confirm the information prior to publication.

Conflict of interest

Journalists active in their communities should not align themselves with partisan political groups or advocacy organizations to avoid any questions of independence. They should also avoid accepting gifts or payment from sources. They should not play a leadership role in fundraising or public relations for a community organization.

Journalists should avoid direct investing in a corporation in which they have a professional interest. They should not use business information gained in the course of their work for personal gain.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism and fabrication are fundamental acts of dishonesty and have no place in journalism.

Newsgathering

Journalists should identify themselves so that sources clearly know they are providing information for publication. There can be exceptions: For example, when journalists are reporting a breaking-news crime, fire, battle or other turmoil, or a mass-attendance event, it may not be practical to speak directly with those who are involved.

Undercover investigations, in which journalists may not identify themselves to all sources, should be undertaken with great care and only after editors decide that is the best way to report on a significant story of high public interest and impact.

Photo

News photos may not be changed or altered beyond typical editing techniques like toning and sharpening. Cropping may be used to focus attention on relevant news content. Color may be adjusted only to ensure honest reproduction. The contents of a photo, however, should never be manipulated, electronically or otherwise.

News photos, as well as videos, must not be staged or recreated. They must tell the truth.

Photo illustrations and graphic elements may be used to highlight an essential element of a

news story, but should do so in a way that is fair and accurate. Photo illustrations should be clearly labeled.

Sensitive news judgments

- Matters of taste: Journalists should be responsive to community's standards when deciding whether to publish sensitive images or information -- for example, a photo of a dead body or the graphic description of an alleged sex offense in an affidavit.
- Obscenities and profanities: Journalists should avoid gratuitous use of profanities in print and audio/video efforts. Use of profanity should meet a high bar that includes its value in the context of the story.
- Ethnic, racial and religious references: Generally, follow AP style in identification of race, ethnicity and religion. If a news subject expresses a desire for a slightly different description -- African-American rather than black, or Latino rather than Hispanic -- use the preferred description so long as it is within reason. In crime reporting, avoid suspect descriptions that include race but are too general to be of any value, because they can serve to target innocent people and perpetuate damaging stereotypes.
- Fair treatment of news sources: Journalists should not promise favorable news coverage in exchange for information, nor should they threaten uncooperative sources with unfavorable news coverage. News organizations should not pay news subjects for stories.
- Special consideration for vulnerable people: Those who are unaccustomed to dealing with the media, or are at a time of extreme vulnerability, or lack the maturity or mental capacity to understand the implications of talking to the media, deserve special consideration. Journalists should not take advantage of a subject's naiveté in dealing with the media and should consider the adverse consequences that could befall him or her.
- Obedience to the law: Journalists should obey the law when gathering news. They should not obtain information -- for example, documents, email or voicemail -- by theft. Journalists should not gain unauthorized access to computer files, nor should they wiretap telephones. They may record telephone conversations in compliance with state law.
- When to withhold names and other news: A journalist's goal is to publish news, but in some cases publishing a name could cause harm to a person, community or other entity. Journalists should consider whether to name crime victims who could, if identified, be victimized again. Examples include the elderly, sex crime victims, victims

of trauma and the mentally disabled. Any decision to withhold news should be weighed against the potential public benefit of publication. Every effort should be made to get sources on the record. Requests to remain anonymous must meet a high standard (see unnamed sources above).

- Juveniles: Those charged with a crime as a juvenile enjoy a number of confidentiality protections that adults do not. This is because states are recognized to have an interest in rehabilitating juvenile delinquents, and that interest may be complicated by reporting the names of juveniles involved in crimes. News organizations have the right to publish names of juveniles. In such cases, there should be a clear public benefit that outweighs the need to protect a juvenile's privacy. Lacking such a reason, the juvenile's identity should be protected where possible.
- Sex crime victims: Generally speaking, news outlets should not name victims of sex crimes, because of the social stigma and potential that the victim will be harmed by publication.
- Witnesses: News organizations should decide on a case-by-case basis whether to identify witnesses who face a threat of retribution.
- Suicides: As a general rule, news organizations do not need to report on suicides that occur outside public view. But in those cases where the event happens in a public place, involves a public figure, or is otherwise newsworthy, there is legitimate reason for publication. In those cases, journalists should report with sensitivity, recognizing the stigma attached to suicide and the possible connection of the suicide to a mental illness.

Online ethics

Online journalism is an extension of, not separate from, print journalism. Accuracy, fairness and other ethical standards apply to what is published online. Maintain core journalistic standards; any difference should be of style, not substance.

- Breaking news -- Use news judgment and assess the source of information before retweeting, reposting or reporting in an ongoing situation, because if the information is wrong, you've damaged your credibility. Publish when facts are in hand; don't wait for all reporting to be finished, as is done for print.
- Independence -- Journalists should not blog, tweet, post or otherwise publish opinion or commentary on institutions or stories that they cover. Retweeting or 'sharing' information from news subject is acceptable, but journalists should refrain from adding their commentary to a shared post.
- Mistakes -- Correct mistakes on social media and online content as soon as possible. Establish a threshold for publication of online corrections, just as is done for print

corrections.

- Reporting -- Journalists should not publish photos or text taken from a website, blog or social media site unless they can verify that the content came from the person whose information they are using and unless they have the copyright holder's permission, or the information falls under fair use.
- However, when the creator of a website, blog or social media site is the subject of a news story, journalists may republish text, photos or videos from the subject's pages to the extent that it provides information about or understanding of the newsmaker and related news events.
- Community -- Journalists may participate in online communities. In doing so, they should recognize that their public personality will reflect on their role as an independent journalist, as well as on the reputation of their news organization, and should act accordingly.
- Copyright -- Seek public domain content when looking for images to publish online. Otherwise, except in cases of fair use, seek the copyright holder's permission -- and be sure to get to the holder, not someone who republished an image without permission.
Linking to others' work online is good, but a news organization should publish only a small portion of a story from another site -- enough for people to be informed but not enough to make the original irrelevant. The idea is to get people to the original story.
- Requests to remove information -- If someone whose criminal record has been expunged asks that a story be taken offline, make an effort to verify and publish the new information about the expungement, updating the original story with the new information. News organizations should correct or update stories when new information becomes available. But they should not change or delete what has been previously reported.
- Verification -- When using information from a website, blog or social media, a journalist should seek to verify the information from one or more unrelated sources. On rare occasions, when the information is deemed of high public importance, a journalist may report such information without further verification, but should clearly state that the information has not been verified and that it is working to verify the information..
- Subjects of online news: When reporting on an individual, business, website or other entity in the news, journalists may republish text, photos or videos from the subject's website, blog or social media to the extent that it is fair usage, providing information about or understanding of the news maker and related news events.