

Chapter 2

International Standards



Most journalistic codes agree that accuracy, impartiality and fairness are the foundation stones of good journalism

JOURNALISM IS AS DIVERSE as the world it covers. The hard-news reporter works differently from the feature writer who has different instincts from the celebrity profile writer or the weekly columnist. The habits of the American reporter are often quite distinct from those of the British journalist, both of whom write quite differently from their colleagues in the Continental European press. Styles in other regions and continents may differ still more.

Yet amid this diversity, journalist organisations around the world have sought to codify professional ethics.

Most agree that accuracy, impartiality and fairness are the foundation stones of good journalism, principles that also go to the core of IWPR training.

This chapter reviews those international standards, examining the key elements essential for good journalism.

Of course, there are differences, but quite often they are of tone, stress and degree. Take a look at the following, all of which draw on these core standards:

- Warnings against incitement and discrimination feature high in the Bosnian Journalists' Press Code.
- Impartiality and accuracy are at the top of the BBC Producers' guidelines.
- The Canon of Journalism of the Japanese Association of Newspaper Publishers and Editors pledges newspapers to "continued effort towards an affluent and peaceful future."
- The Association of Journalists of Kyrgyzstan has an unequivocal start to their Code of Ethics: "The journalist's duty is to serve the truth. The role of mass media is to look for the truth."

'The journalist's duty is to serve the truth,' says the Association of Journalists of Kyrgyzstan

All the codes find it easy to agree on what journalists should avoid:

- Libel and slander (defamation)
- Plagiarism (passing off others' material as one's own)
- Accepting bribes
- Making the story up (fabrication and pure invention)

*Fact-based reporting
is the bedrock
of all journalism*

There are many different strategies for handling specialist approaches to journalism – how to cover war crimes, how to report on victims and trauma, how to pursue “public journalism” or undertake “peace reporting”, the latter being a complex and sometimes controversial topic focusing on how reporting conflict and the aftermath of a conflict can be a force for good. Some of these topics are outlined later in this handbook.

But the bedrock of all of these, and the media’s core contribution to democracy and development, is responsible, fact-based reporting.

Providing reliable information to support responsible public debate, hold officials accountable, and inform the decisions of the electorate - these are the underlying tasks of the media in a democratic society.

Indeed, many professional codes stress the fundamental role of the media in providing reliable information to enable people to be free and self-governing.

The Key Elements

Nearly every code of ethics agrees on at least three fundamental factors in the practice of journalism: impartiality, accuracy and fairness. These can be considered universal standards.

Ethical guidelines also stress honesty and decency in newsgathering. Many codes also cover protection of sources as an essential component of newsgathering.

1. Impartiality

Most journalists' codes of conduct and rules highlight "impartiality" or "independence" in reporting. But this concept can be difficult to define.

Impartiality means reporting should not support one political party, religion, people or ethnic group over another. It allows for fairly reporting one side's policies or pronouncements, and for including comments that one party or group may make about another. But the core principle is that the reporter should not directly express his or her own comments, opinions or political preferences.

Balanced journalism provides clear distinction between what is fact and what is opinion.

Publications in many countries find it hard to survive without some financial backing, and political parties, pressure groups or powerful businesses with political interests are the natural candidates to support them. In such cases the newspaper should at least publish details of its sources of finance, so readers can make their own judgements about its impartiality.

Responsible publications make clear distinctions between news reporting and editorial opinion. News appears on the front page and the leaders and comment appear in separate pages clearly marked inside. In some newspapers, articles which are “analytical” and thus may unavoidably reflect some of the journalist’s perspective are clearly marked as “news analysis” to distinguish them from straight news. In many newspapers, the editorial teams which produce the news and those which produce the editorial or comment sections are kept firmly separate, and may not even communicate with each other at all.

In the West, many media outlets and publications are owned by large companies and the issue of commercial impartiality is also sensitive. Editorial and business or advertising departments are separated by a “Chinese wall”. There have been cases where an

editor has resigned because a publisher or owner sought to influence the content of the publication. Similarly, failure to resign has led to the discrediting of some publications.

A classic tension occurs if a newspaper or broadcaster has a story that may embarrass the owners or a company which takes out major advertisements within its pages or on its airwaves. If it publishes the report, then it may lose income. But if it suppresses the report, it is not being impartial and may lose its reputation.

Political impartiality can be difficult to maintain for many reasons. In some countries, media are directly attacked if they criticise the government and will be deemed partisan or “lackeys of foreign governments” even if they are only trying to maintain an independent line. It is an especially difficult position to maintain during times of conflict when societies become highly polarised.

Impartiality is also hard to maintain for more mundane reasons. The remarks of a state president will invariably be taken to be more newsworthy than a peasant’s, even if the national leader is spouting patent propaganda while the villager may be raising neglected concerns that go to the heart of government policy.

2. Accuracy

Every journalists' code stresses the need for accuracy. The urge to "get it right" is always strong and takes priority over speed. There are no prizes for being fast and wrong.

Writing for a journalist is the skill of presenting information clearly, concisely and effectively. It is based on hard facts, so the reporter must know how and where to find reliable information.

This means good observation, good listening, sound background reading and, above all, talking to the right people to find reliable information.

A journalistic axiom is that the best reporters are only as good as their personal contacts. So you must learn how to cultivate them and how to evaluate the information offered. This means assessing who is reliable (and getting their trust), and who is not. A critical challenge is how to reconcile conflicting accounts of the same event.

Many journalistic organisations insist on the "two source rule" - that means that every fact must be confirmed by two independent sources before it can be taken as reliable.

Journalists need to take extensive notes or tape record interviews when possible to be sure the report is as precise as possible. Dedication to this recognised principle is what maintains journalists' integrity and credibility - even if it is just getting names down correctly. Accuracy requires meticulous attention to detail, as one small, superficial error undermines the reliability of a whole report. This means checking and double checking facts whenever possible, even generally accepted information.

The urge to 'get it right' is always strong and takes priority over speed

Getting the story straight may mean calling sources back to make sure what they said is portrayed correctly, especially if another source is disputing it. This is called fact-checking, and in some established publications entire articles are re-reported by a separate researcher or junior reporter to ensure accuracy, especially in a long or especially controversial feature article. Sometimes it may mean delaying the report to avoid mistakes if there is any doubt. Getting it wrong can affect future credibility and at worse can cause serious damage, including a legal challenge.

Accuracy is not just about facts; it is about proper context. Damaging information about a candidate before an election or

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about a company's performance will have serious consequences. So the reader needs to know where it came from and whether this source has partisan motives. Are there hidden interests pushing the information that should make the reporter wary and should be exposed so the audience can make a fair judgement? It makes all the difference if some product is criticised by a consumer or by a representative of a rival company producing a similar item.

Many people complain that stories are sometimes not "objective". This may be a valid criticism, especially if the journalist has an obvious agenda. Or it may simply be a coded way of saying that the article does not fit their point of view.

Most experienced journalists would agree that pure objectivity in a news story is very hard, if not impossible, to achieve. A journalist's background or perspective could skew the presentation of a story in many ways. A journalist should always be conscious of his or her own perspective and strive to be impartial when reporting.

Above all, a journalist relies on facts, and testing the facts for reliability. Good stories may start from a journalist's excitement

or even anger. But they must treat honestly the search for information to support the story and accept that it may reveal unexpected and perhaps disturbing results. The method of getting and reporting the facts must remain objective or, to avoid a complex concept, at least strive to be objective.

3. Fairness

To be fair to the people you interview means being fair both in how you gather the information and in how you present it.

Interviewees have the right to know what an article or programme will be about: what kind of contribution they are expected to make; whether a broadcast interview will be live or recorded, and how it might be edited. Subjects have a right to know if they are being filmed, and if so, how that film will be used. Investigative inquiries might require some variation of this, but fairness to the parties and the story remains the guideline.

The International Federation of Journalists says, “The journalist shall only use fair methods to obtain news, photographs and documents.” This means identifying oneself as a journalist under normal circumstances, and never using threats or displays of force to get information.

Just because you know something doesn't mean that you can use it in an article

Just because you know something doesn't mean that you can use it in an article. You don't "have" the information for publication until you have secured reliable and in most cases "on the record" sourcing through fair and transparent means. In particular, only in the most rare and extreme circumstances justified by higher public interest may it be considered acceptable to break the law in order to obtain information.

Fairness in presentation means allowing someone you are criticising the chance to respond to those comments within the same story. Someone may be unhappy about an article you write about him, but he should never be surprised because the reporter should always have discussed the critical points with him before publication.

If you do not feel comfortable discussing your criticisms with a subject of the story, you should feel uncomfortable publishing them. (Note: this does not mean reading out the story itself, but it does mean explaining the substance of your critical remarks.) Indeed, if you are criticising an individual, your report will be stronger if you also include all the counter-arguments and positive points of the individual. Your article will appear more balanced and more reliable, and the criticisms will have more weight.

4. Honesty and Decency

The way journalists do their jobs and present the results - their standards of ethics and practice - is vital to keeping public trust. Whether written or not, a code of good practice is a healthy reminder of how important it is, in gathering, checking and distributing the news, to play by the rules. Given the complexities and occasional moral dilemmas faced in the practice of journalism, it is also helpful on an individual level to have a sense of one's own boundaries, guidelines and personal ethics.

As well as accuracy and fairness, most codes stress honesty, transparency and common sense in newsgathering. They balance the pressures to ferret out information at all costs with a concept of decency.

For example, reporters will invariably be persistent in their reporting, but must not use harassment or intimidation. Journalists should gather information openly, and should not, except for exceptional circumstances (and with explicit approval of their editor), use hidden recording devices. Anyone criticised by the press should have a fair right of reply.

Journalists should avoid undue intrusion where people have

suffered trauma and shock and should respect a person's right to privacy. Children and victims of sexual crimes must be treated with care, and legislation in many countries requires that they not be named or photographed. Business journalists should avoid reporting on a company in which they have a financial interest, and if they do must declare that interest, such as if they own stock. Many media organisations have detailed rules governing securities ownership and trading by journalists.

Yet due to the complexity of ethical questions, many journalists' codes and policies avoid declaring too many absolute rules. In extraordinary cases, well-established rules of newsroom practice must sometimes be reconsidered in light of a higher public interest. Codes of practice usually specify that journalists should never pretend to be something they are not. How can a journalist expose dishonesty if he is not honest himself? Yet sometimes the only way to expose corruption of officials conclusively, for instance, may require adopting a disguise or a subterfuge to trap such people. In such cases, consultation with editors and peers, and a strong sense of one's own ethical codes, provide essential guidance.

One other key ethical point is never to plagiarise. Each new piece of journalism naturally builds on previous stories already published. But do cite a colleague or even rival whose reporting you are drawing from, and never lift sections of other people's writing and present it as your own. It is (and should be) a one-way ticket to the end of your career.

Plagiarism is a one-way ticket to the end of your career

When facing an ethical dilemma, always ask:

- Is there another way to get the same information?
- Can you explain in good conscience your decisions to those affected?
- If a similar situation occurs, would you handle it in the same way?
- How would you feel if you were the subject, rather than the reporter, of the story?
- Have you done everything you can to be accurate and fair?
- Have you tried to find all the significant aspects of a story?
- Are the decisions free from outside and especially personal influences?

5. Protecting Sources

Journalists' codes of ethics generally emphasise the protection of sources, sometimes in apparent defiance of law. Some refer to a "moral obligation" not to reveal sources.

At IWPR, we consider protection of sources a journalist's fundamental right. But it is hard to make the case that such confidentiality has been universally accepted as an international standard. Sometimes confidentiality is breached and often with serious consequences for the journalist or source involved. Journalists' organisations like the International Federation of Journalists, the US-based Committee to Protect Journalists and the Paris-based Reporters Sans Frontières have all taken up cases where journalists have sought to protect the identity of their sources when faced with strong pressure – sometimes from courts, sometimes from repressive governments – to reveal names.

In a pragmatic sense, a journalist who promises to keep a source anonymous but then subsequently reveals the name will find it very hard to be trusted by sources in future. But when a whistleblower or political opponent gives a strong or revealing

anonymous statement to the press, officials may want to know the name so they can penalise the person and make other people afraid to make similar remarks in future.

Often the question is framed in legal terms. If a journalist receives confidential information from an anonymous source, the government may wish to take legal action against the source, arguing that the leak breached confidentiality laws.

The issue goes to the heart of the debate over freedom of information. Yet most countries do not guarantee a journalist's right to protect sources, and occasionally in the United States, UK and Australia, journalists have gone to prison over these issues. Some courts are sympathetic and look at whether the public interest is best served by such protection. The European Court of Justice has made decisions that might help journalists.

*No one has a
monopoly on
the truth*

6. Things to watch for:

- Present all sides of a story. In a dispute, you must try to speak to “both sides”, but remember that may not be enough. In a conflict, there will be “warring factions”. But there will also be international official observers or diplomats, independent nongovernmental parties and unaffiliated civilians. No one has a monopoly on the truth, but the less affiliated a person is, the more reliable their information may be.
- Where an accusation is made against someone, make sure that it is presented in a fair context. That means including balancing information or other important factors, particularly a fair right to reply to any accusations.
- Be transparent about the journalistic process. You are a journalist serving a public role, and should be up front about what you are doing. The more clear you are about this in your own mind, the more confidence you will bring to the task of coaxing sensitive information out of your sources.
- Avoid conflicts of interest or situations that might create such conflicts. Impartial journalists should generally not

hold public office while working in the profession, take important jobs in political parties, participate in public demonstrations when reporting on them, or do anything that would suggest to the public that their reporting is being influenced by such events.

- Avoid financial conflicts or any appearance that personal gain (other than salaries) is a motive for the report. Accepting payment from a source to influence your reporting is entirely unethical. Reporting on a company in which the journalist has a personal interest is unacceptable. While it may be necessary sometimes to accept a meal or a drink, for instance, nothing should suggest that a favourable report is being promised in return or that an unfavourable report might be dropped. Similarly, do not pay for information except in extreme circumstances, which should be cleared with your editor.
- Journalists have to ask difficult questions. A journalist is serving the public's right to know, so has a responsibility to probe. But that does not mean being rude or discourteous. BBC editorial guidelines say be "searching, sharp, sceptical,

*Whatever your own
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informed and to the point” but not “discourteously or emotionally attached to one side of an argument”.

- People should know how their words or images are going to be used (though careful exceptions may be necessary in undercover or investigative stories). Be clear about ground rules for interviews and ask permission to take photographs or video. This can be especially important when reporting a conflict when sometimes, however unwelcome it may be, the military can set the rules. Whatever your own opinion, above all, respect your sources.
- Use unnamed sources with extreme care. Journalists will sometimes cite “senior diplomats”, “high ranking officers” or other anonymous witnesses, who request to be protected. But this is not a licence to allow them to make unreliable accusations, or for the journalist to make up the source (another fast-track career spoiler). If the name is withheld, provide the closest possible description to indicate the credibility of the source. In all cases be transparent, especially with your editor, who may require you to try to convince a source to “come on the record” before enabling you to publish especially sensitive information.

If your information is too good to be true, maybe it is. Use common sense and always ask yourself:

- Have you obtained your information in a reliable and ethical way?
- Have you done everything you can to be accurate and to corroborate your facts?
- Are your decisions free from unfair influence or bias?
- Have you provided balance and context, in particular the right of reply and fair comment to anyone criticised in your article?
- Is there no other way to get the information, especially in the case of an unnamed source?
- Are your sources reliable and have you spoken to all sides of the story?
- Is the information reasonable and does it make sense?
- Most of all, can you stand by your story?

EXERCISES

In this section, you've reviewed:

- The universal concepts of impartiality, accuracy and fairness.
- The journalist's obligation to protect sources.
- Common principles of codes of ethics and practice.
- Various tips and things to watch for in reporting and publishing a story.

Exercise 1

The police let you know “off the record” they are about to arrest a well-liked local businessman known for his charitable works and public service. They say they are looking at fraud and bribery charges. It is late evening and no formal documents are immediately available.

You call the businessman, who confirms that he knows about the allegations and expects to be arrested the next day. He declines to give a direct answer on the accusation. He asks you wait a day before publication so he can tell his family. He says he will “look after you” if you can delay the story.

- What are the ethical dilemmas?
- Are there any other practical problems?
- Should you discuss it with anyone?
- Do you need more information?
- Should you write the story?
- How might you write it on the few facts above, and what do you need in order to expand it properly?

Exercise 2

You have reported on a war crime and published an important story that mobilised international attention to an atrocity. In so doing, you have observed all the classical ethical guidelines of journalism: respecting your sources, keeping your notes carefully, only publishing exactly what you can confirm.

Years later, an international tribunal summons you to testify. Your notebooks are subpoenaed. You are called upon to break your pledges as a journalist and reveal the names of sources and other information which you would not, as a journalist, publish at the time.

Do you participate in the tribunal in order to support the prosecution of an alleged war criminal? Or do you refuse, even at personal risk, in defence of ethical journalistic codes?

ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

Many web sites contain references to international journalism codes. For example see:

www.uta.fi/ethicnet

www.presswise.org.uk

www.ifj.org

See also the Project for Excellence in Journalism:

www.journalism.org

For a listing and links to several major individual codes, see:

www.asne.org/index.cfm?id=387

Plus: **www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=32&aid=16997**

For *The New York Times*:

www.nytc.com/pdf/NYT_Ethical_Journalism_042904.pdf

For the Associated Press: **www.apme.com/index.shtml**

For Reuters: **about.reuters.com/aboutus/editorial**