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Journalism Ethics Guidelines Introduction

OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Since its founding in 1878, our parent company, E.W. Scripps, has been, at its core, a journalism company. The obligation of our journalists and our journalism is to serve the public. We strive to earn and maintain the trust of the public and to be aggressive and fearless in our pursuit of the truth.

Ethical decision-making should occur at every step along the journalistic process, and these guidelines are an expression of the consistent values, standards and processes we use to produce high-quality reporting and storytelling.

These guidelines are for Scripps leaders and our journalists and for those acting in a journalistic function, even if their core job isn't journalistic.

HONESTY

The integrity of our journalism is built on our ethical behavior and the reliability of our reporting. We earn trust when we are truthful, sincere and authentic.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Our journalists strive for transparency throughout the newsgathering and storytelling process. This means:

- We disclose where and how we obtain information whenever possible.
- We make clear to the audience why a story is reported and strive to share our supporting data and documentation with the public.
- Bylines and credits, regardless of platform, should reflect those who reported the story.
- We don't pretend we are someone else, except in rare circumstances such as a war zone or when journalists feel their lives would be endangered if their identities were revealed. The bar for masking a reporter's identity is high.
- We strive to respond to legitimate questions about our reporting and stories in a timely manner.
- We recognize that everything we say or do on social media is public. The content, even on personal sites, represents us and our company to the audience. We are careful in our use of archival material, so as not to mislead people or leave the impression that archival material was gathered as part of the current reporting.

EDITING

Journalists editing text, images, audio and video must preserve the integrity and meaning of quotes and information. Editing should clarify and focus, never mislead.

Some specifics:

- We use quotes or sound bites to best tell the story — but never to change the intent or meaning of what the source said. Partial quotes are acceptable when using only a portion of a quote does not change the meaning or context.
- We can improve the technical quality of audio, video or photographs when necessary. But the editing must ensure the reproduction accurately represents what occurred.

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- We do not manipulate a photo or video. Existing content, including gestures, profanity, nudity or other elements, can be blurred or obscured if necessary when they are offensive or violate policies. Any decision to blur or obscure must be approved by a manager.
- Photo illustrations must be identified as such and must be recognizably different from reality on first look. Discussion with a manager is required before altering or combining photographs and artwork, even for an illustration.

NEWSGATHERING

Our journalists clearly communicate with the people they interview what their story is about and what role the interview will play in the story. If the interviewee requests special terms, such as “off the record” or “on background,” we first consider how this interview will be used and whether it is essential to the reporting. Regardless of the context, we never pay for interviews.

Some specifics:

Unscheduled interview

- A manager must grant prior approval for a journalist to plan an unscheduled interview where the source does not realize they are about to be interviewed and will likely be unprepared and defensive.
- These types of interviews are only acceptable when journalists can prove there is a significant journalistic purpose and other avenues have been exhausted. When we tell the story, we fully disclose to the audience what we did and why.

Undercover/hidden camera/audio recording

- We value individuals’ right to privacy and seek not to invade it. Any choice to record people surreptitiously must be preceded by a conversation with a manager and a company attorney. Legal and safety issues should always be considered as well. Some additional guidance:
- We do not use hidden cameras or microphones to collect information or record people on the phone without the permission of all parties, except in rare circumstances.
- We first examine our journalistic purpose, consider all other alternatives, determine what laws apply and get signoff from our highest-level news manager and a company attorney.
- In an emergent situation when a quick decision must be made, journalists may collect the undercover video or audio but still must receive authorization before this material is published or broadcast.
- When we tell the story, we fully disclose to the audience what we did and why.

Anonymous sources

- Our goal is to obtain information on the record; however, we recognize that in rare circumstances, an anonymous source may be essential.
- The decision to use an anonymous source requires a discussion with managers and others involved in the reporting. There must be a substantial editorial justification, and all involved must be satisfied that this person is credible, the information is credible and no other viable path to the information exists.
- Before we use an interview with an anonymous source, we press hard on their motivation and for information that supports what the source tells us.

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- We make every effort to fact-check and verify what the source has told us. If the source cannot provide any supporting information or documentation, we avoid using that source.
- We avoid using anonymous sources to express pejorative comments or negative charges about a person or institution. On those rare occasions when someone is blowing the whistle on grave misdeeds, we may use those claims but only after careful discussion with managers.
- Ideally, when we use an anonymous source in a story, there are other named sources in the story.
- In the rare occasions when we use multiple anonymous sources in a story, the sources should be independent of each other in their statements and/or accusations (no composites).
- When we tell the story, we fully disclose to the audience what we did and why.

Pseudonyms

- In rare instances, a pseudonym may be approved to protect a highly vulnerable individual. This approval must meet the highest standards of verification. A news manager must know the identity of the source, and there must be a strong editorial reason that is clearly explained to the audience.

ACCURACY

A journalist's job is not only to convey information that is correct but to put that information in meaningful context. A story should be more than technically accurate; the overall tone, information and treatment should reflect the facts. Deadline and platform are no excuse for inaccuracy.

ATTRIBUTION & VERIFICATION

Our facts will be accurate, complete and fairly presented.

- We state clearly where our information came from and what we can and cannot confirm.
- Being first is less important than being right. In a breaking news situation, we report only what we know.
- We take utmost care in framing a developing story and make it our priority to help the audience sort through what is unconfirmed, what we know to be true and what is emerging but reliably sourced information.
- We avoid saying "some reports" even if others are relaying unsourced information. We provide attribution for every new detail we decide to report publicly but did not report personally. This care extends to headlines, captions, promos, teases and social posts.
We use caution when passing along information on social media, especially in fast-breaking news situations. Our social media policy is a great resource in these moments as well.
- There are times when a documented fact still may need additional verification. For example, some polls, research papers or press releases may cite things as fact when they are not, or they are only partial facts. It is our job to confirm the numbers, look at the whole study in context and check the source or outlet conducting the poll/study or releasing the data.
- For stories that are in-depth, original in research and reporting or involve the unearthing of hidden information, additional fact-checking must be built into the production and editing timeline. This may include following up with sources, confirming that quotes are accurately represented, rechecking data and making sure factual points are not taken out of context.

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- Before using audio, video or visual images posted online by individuals or others, we do everything we can to verify the accuracy. Images get manipulated, old video gets repackaged and reported as new and can be taken in one part of the world and made to appear as another part of the world. If we can't verify the accuracy, we avoid using the content.

SOURCES/QUOTES

- Whenever contacting a source, we consider: Is this a trustworthy voice? What agenda is this person likely to promote? How does this person's perspective help the audience's understanding?
- In a bipartisan political system, we can be led to think there are "two sides to every story." In fact, stories may have many sides that are potentially important and heighten the fairness of our reporting.
- When editing an interview, quoting or paraphrasing anyone, the result should accurately reflect what the person was asked and their response.
- If a source has a discernable bias or agenda, we should explain that clearly to the audience. For example, if the interviewee is coming from an organization that has a political perspective, we disclose it: "John Smith is policy director at The Institute of Policy, a left-leaning think tank/a think tank that has lobbied in favor of X policy."

PLAGIARISM

- Our journalists do not steal material from other sources. Any content produced by an outside source must be attributed to that source.
- Plagiarism, fabrication and any misappropriation of text, images, video or audio are all grounds for discipline up to and including termination.

CORRECTIONS

- We take all requests for clarification or correction seriously. All errors in our reporting must be reported to a manager immediately. If the error has legal consequences, our legal team also should be contacted immediately.
- We correct or clarify errors promptly, prominently and transparently.
- We will broadcast and/or publish corrections and clarifications. These corrections will be prominent so there is no confusion about what changes were made to a story.

UNPUBLISHING

Our objective is to accurately publish news and information. We do not rewrite history or make news disappear. On occasion, circumstances might warrant the correcting, editing or updating of a news item from our website. In exceptional cases and after deliberation with senior managers and legal counsel, we might remove or unpublish a news story from our website. For example, we take down mugshots when charges have been dropped.

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FAIRNESS

Fairness requires the highest degree of care in both the content of our journalism and our treatment of the people we cover. We treat others with respect and professionalism even while we strive to report the truth as fully as possible.

PRESENTING THE NEWS

- We report facts and offer informed analysis based on our knowledge. We do not give personal opinion in our reporting.
- Word selection is critical. We avoid loaded language and sensationalism. We are careful not to presume guilt when a person or organization has been accused of wrongdoing.
- When paraphrasing, quoting or editing what people tell us or say, we work diligently to preserve the integrity of their comments and perspective.

REPORTING AND INTERVIEWING

- We inform our interview subjects when we begin recording video, audio or phone interviews — and we are clear when they have ended. That said, unless there is an agreement in advance that an interview is “off the record,” anything said by the interviewee before or after a taped or phone interview is considered on the record.
- We seek the most insightful perspectives and arguments from multiple sides, especially when reporting on contentious and controversial issues.
- We are careful not to assume that all sides should be weighted equally. We avoid false equivalency and giving equal space to unsupportable arguments. If the balance of evidence in an issue weighs more toward one side, we say so. If someone states something that is not supported by the facts, we say so.
- When seeking responses to a news event, we are upfront about deadlines. We give people a reasonable amount of time to respond and, if necessary, multiple ways to do so (in person, phone, email, etc.) If a subject cannot respond under our deadline, we tell the audience. A reasonable amount of time will vary from story to story and should be discussed by the reporter and manager before releasing the story.
- We make every effort to be fair to all sides regardless of deadline. If a response requires specific research, our deadlines should be extended to reflect that whenever possible.
- We are upfront with subjects about allegations, documents and findings we are going to ask them about. We give them enough information in advance to be able to prepare responses to specific questions about specific issues.
- If we cannot get a response and absolutely need to move forward with a story, we are transparent about our process. We provide detail, including audio or video, about how many times we knocked on doors, called, emailed and texted to get a response.
- We seek documents, public statements or testimony that may support or explain the person or organization’s position or defend their side. We look for proxies — someone who is qualified to represent or defend that side.

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ALLEGATIONS OF WRONGDOING

- When reporting about people, companies or institutions that have been accused but not convicted of wrongdoing or a crime, we take extreme care to present facts and avoid language that presumes guilt.
- We specify the source of any accusations. In a criminal case, the source should be an arrest record, an indictment or the statement of a public official connected with the case. Whenever possible, we contact a representative for the accused as well.
- We are extremely careful with legal terms: Someone is not “arrested for assault.” If a charge has been filed, that person has been “arrested on a charge of assault.” If a charge hasn’t been filed, the person has been “arrested, and no charges have been filed.”
- We avoid passive voice. It unhelpfully widens suspicion. For example, “Person X is suspected” should be swapped for the active version, “So-and-so suspects Person X ...”
- We avoid using phrases such as “alleged shooter” and instead use “suspect” as a first reference.

ATTRIBUTION

- In general, when excerpting others’ work, we use as little as possible to make our point and very clearly credit the organization and/or reporter.

MINIMIZING HARM

At times even legitimate, ethical newsgathering can be intrusive. And sometimes our reporting and storytelling can be difficult for audiences to watch, hear or read. In all cases, we are guided by our ethical standards and practices, and we show care and concern for everyone affected by our work. We always strive to minimize harm.

CHILDREN

- We are not required by law to get parental permission before interviewing or filming minors, but our newsrooms strive to do so. This applies when the minor is under 16 or may not be mature enough to understand the implications of their media involvement. We always consider the harm that our reporting could possibly cause them in the future.
- Before interviewing a minor about a sensitive topic that may have legal ramifications or could be harmful (such as school shootings, abuse, crime, sexual activity, difficult family relationships and even academic cheating), we make every effort to first seek permission from at least one of the parents or a legal guardian. If we can’t get permission, we seek another source.

GRAPHIC CONTENT

- Graphic content includes, but is not limited to, sexually explicit images or language; images of excessive violence; or images depicting blood, injuries or death. When determining whether to include graphic content, we first discuss the content with a manager. We consider the following:
 - What is our journalistic purpose? Is it justifiable?
 - If for broadcast, in what daypart will the graphic content air?
 - Is it necessary to show or describe in order for the audience to understand the story?

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- Should we blur part of the image?
- When deciding to include graphic content, we first issue a verbal or written warning to the audience so people are prepared and have the option to avoid the content. We give viewers time to opt out of viewing a video that might autoplay online or on social media by including a written warning slide at the beginning of these videos.

GENERIC OR BACKGROUND VIDEO

- We use generic video with care and caution.
- We avoid showing generic video of a person, business or organization when referring to arrests, indictments, charges, allegations or anything negative in a story.

REPORTING IN DISTRESSING SITUATIONS

Situations such as natural disasters, mass shootings and violent attacks require particular care in our coverage. Before interviewing victims, witnesses or people impacted by the event, we first consider the harm our reporting could possibly cause them in the future. Some specifics:

Mass Shootings and Attacks

- We avoid terms that could be romanticized by aspiring attackers (for example, “lone wolf”). Often, “the suspect” will do.
- We avoid excessive use of the suspect’s name and image.
- We avoid overuse of perpetrators’ manifestos. If the reporting does require us to reference a manifesto, we paraphrase unless a quote legitimately furthers the public understanding of the incident.

Suicides (from the [Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma](#))

- We report on suicide as a public health issue. We inform the audience without sensationalizing the suicide. We use neutral photos of the individual.
- We include contact information for suicide crisis hotlines.
- We use language such as “died by suicide” or “killed herself” rather than referring to a “successful or unsuccessful” suicide.
- We avoid referring to recent suicides as an “epidemic.”

Survivors of Sexualized Violence (from the [DART Center](#))

- Reporting on sexual violence requires specialized care and specialized interviewing. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma has [excellent guidance](#) for every stage from preparation to writing the story.
- We don’t identify survivors of sexual violence without their agreement.
- It is important that we treat survivors with sensitivity. We should avoid door knocks and unscheduled interviews.
- Note that many find the term “survivor” to be more empowering than the term “victim.” When possible, we consult the source about their preference.
- Before including an interview with a survivor in a story, we seek verification of the person’s story, such as documents or witnesses. If the person does not want to provide this information, we are

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extremely cautious about using their story and consult with a manager. If we use the interview but cannot verify the person's story, we should explain that to the audience.

- While the term "sex scandal" might be appropriate for a story about a consensual extramarital affair, we avoid using it as a label for nonconsensual sexual contact. Doing so imprecisely labels the encounter as sex rather than violent crime.

Sex and Gender

- We strive to respect people's preferred pronouns. When possible, we consult the source about their preference. It may also be appropriate to use the singular "they."
- We consider whether someone's biological sex, gender identification or gender designation is relevant to the story. For example, the fact that Chelsea Manning, the woman accused of espionage, is transgender is likely irrelevant for a story about the information she leaked, but that fact might be important for a story about her detention in an all-men's facility.

POTENTIALLY OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE

- On the air and online, we seek to avoid use of language that an audience may find offensive. We also recognize that different communities, online and offline, have their own norms, cultures and thresholds with respect to language and subject matter.
- In rare circumstances when there has been a robust discussion about potentially offensive language and it has been deemed journalistically essential to the story, we may decide to use the language and refrain from editing or bleeping certain words.
- In those cases, in broadcast, online and at times in audio, a language advisory will precede the story.

PRIVATE CITIZENS

- We recognize there is a difference between public persons and private citizens who may be less comfortable or familiar with the media and that private people have a greater right to control information and images about themselves than public figures. We consider the consequences of broadcasting or publishing personal information about private citizens.
- We select visuals carefully, taking care to avoid unintended implications about the people pictured.
- We are discerning and choose visuals that obscure faces and other identifying characteristics if needed.
- In medical settings, police ride-alongs, use of drone photography and other spaces where we may be gathering interviews and content, we are careful not to include images or documents of people who have not given us consent to use their private information, except in rare circumstances and if there is a legitimate public interest in such individuals.

INDEPENDENCE

Our journalists keep a clear eye on any competing loyalties that could undermine our integrity. We avoid any conflicts of interest, or any appearance of conflict, that can compromise our credibility.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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- All journalists, content producers, freelancers and contractors, including those who work on non-news and or/arts content, must disclose to their managers, and if necessary the public, any potential conflicts of interest. This includes personal, commercial, business or financial interests. This extends to the activities of a business partner, spouse or domestic partner and other family members.
- For transparency, when we report on entities or individuals that involve our company, our company-owned businesses or our company's board members , we always disclose the relationship.
- We avoid using our family members in our stories.

GIFTS/FREEBIES

We pay our own way. We accept no gifts, free meals, free trips or free admission unless it involves seats not sold to the public, like a press box. Sometimes a meal or refreshments may be included in the admission to an event where we have been invited to speak. We use common sense if it would be rude to refuse to eat.

OUTSIDE WORK/HONORARIA

- When considering any freelance and journalism work, including teaching, speaking appearances or writing books, whether paid or volunteer, we follow the company's code of conduct.
- We do not accept reimbursement or honoraria to attend conferences sponsored by government entities or interest groups.

POLITICS/ADVOCACY

- All employees with any responsibility for reporting or editing news-related content must refrain from partisan political activity of any kind, including making political contributions or displaying partisan signage. This applies to all social media platforms and other methods of digital communication.
- We recognize there are times when the mission of the program or content is to express an opinion; for example, some podcasts, station editorial boards or online op-eds. In those cases, we should be transparent and respectful of differing opinions.

REPORTING AND INTERVIEWING

- There are no sacred cows: We report stories we deem newsworthy. It is our newsrooms, not our business interests, that have full and final authority over all journalistic decisions.
- We do not submit questions to anyone in advance unless a news manager has given approval. If questions are submitted in advance, we disclose this in our reporting. Giving broad outlines of the topics we seek to discuss is fine, especially if it allows the interviewee to gather relevant documents or background information.
- We do not allow sources to preview full scripts or stories in advance of their broadcast or posting. But we do often read quotes back to a source prior to publication for purposes of accuracy and fairness. We also read transcripts or play video or audio of an interview to a third party if the purpose is to get a response to what someone has said.

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- We avoid non-disclosure agreements. We do agree to “embargoes” on news that set an agreed-upon time for information to be released. If the embargo is broken by another news outlet, we may decide to release the information sooner.
- All the material we gather for our reporting — audio, video, notes, research, etc. — belongs to our company, and we do not turn anything over to government officials, law enforcement or outside parties.
- We seek to understand terms of service when posting or gathering material online. Terms may allow information to be used in unintended ways, and it may enable law enforcement or others to obtain reporting without our consent.
- At times, it may be appropriate to disclose specific advertisers, but the bar is high and should be made on a case-by-case basis by a senior news manager.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SALES AND EDITORIAL

- We do not give favored treatment to advertisers or any other special interests.
- We prominently label any sponsored content. For broadcast, Federal Communications Commission regulations require the use of “Sponsored By,” “Paid for By,” or “Furnished By” to indicate when we have received something of value to air content on television. The requirements are less stringent on some other platforms, such as podcasting, see below.
- To keep the relationship between sales and editorial appropriate, newsroom staff do not allow the sales team to drive editorial decision-making.

PODCASTING AND HOST-READ ADS

As mentioned elsewhere, we recognize that different communities, online and offline, have their own norms and culture with respect to language and subject matter. Our ethical decision-making remains the same even if our decisions differ depending on the community. It is a norm in podcasting to have host-read ads. We make every effort to be clear with the listener about what is an ad and what is journalism. We use copy or sound or music to clearly announce when the host is reading advertising content. Advertisers have no control over our content. Hosts are given veto power over who advertises on their shows.

OBEY THE LAW

Legal issues permeate the journalistic process, and many of those issues have been addressed elsewhere in these guidelines. There are, however, several subjects that we emphasize to allow our journalists to avoid legal entanglements that otherwise detract from fair and accurate reporting.

We do not violate any generally applicable law during the news-gathering process.

- Our journalists follow state laws regarding the audio and video recording of others.
- Our journalists may not trespass or break into private property. In general, door knocks are an acceptable practice where the entrance to a private building is visible from public property and there is no signage prohibiting access.

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- Our journalists follow state laws related to invasion of privacy regardless of whether you eventually use video content or your observations in your on-air or digital reporting. These laws fall under the general heading of “intrusion” and/or “intentional infliction of emotional distress.”

We Do not infringe on the intellectual property rights of others.

- We seek permission before using video, photos, graphic images and other works originally created by someone else, with rare exceptions such as public records and material that qualifies as fair use.
- If permission is not possible, reliance on fair use is case-specific and must be done only after approval from a news manager and, if necessary, our legal department.
- Cutting and pasting is never a good idea. Social platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others have terms of use that provide guidance on what uses are permissible.