

Code of Ethics for Journalists

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BACKGROUND

Every profession has its respective code of ethics across the globe. Judges, university professors, civil servants, doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers and professionals from various fields have their distinct codes of ethics. Though codes of ethics vary from profession to profession, their ultimate goals remain the same. In every profession, codes of ethics are formulated to make professionals concerned morally responsible towards their duty and the society at large. As in other professions, journalists and media professionals have to follow their own code of ethics. Code of ethics, however, is neither law nor any mandatory rule. It is all about moral issue and value. Since journalism is a socially responsible profession, it also has its distinct code of ethics for journalists.

(See attached documents to know about journalists' code of ethics in Nepal).

The primary themes common to most of the codes of journalistic standards and ethics are the following:

ACCURACY:

Journalists must do all they can to ensure due accuracy in their output. All output must be well sourced, based on sound evidence, thoroughly tested and presented in clear and precise language. Journalists must be honest and open about what they don't know and avoid unfounded speculations. Claims, allegations, materials, facts and other contents that cannot be corroborated should normally be attributed. Journalists must not knowingly and materially mislead audiences. They shouldn't distort known facts and present invented materials as facts. They should try to witness events and gather information first hand. Where this is not possible, they should talk to first hand sources and, where necessary, corroborate their evidence. They should be reluctant to rely on a single source. Even if they do rely on a single source, a named on-the-record source is always preferable. They should record their research interview with sources, wherever possible. In circumstances where recording might inhibit the source, full notes should be made, preferably at the time or, if not, as soon as possible afterwards. In all their contents they must check and verify information, facts and documents, where required, to achieve due accuracy. Journalists must acknowledge serious factual errors and correct them quickly, clearly and appropriately.

BALANCE/IMPARTIALITY:

Another challenging but a "must do" task for journalists is to maintain balance in his/her output. How to maintain balance in his/her story then? Balancing story or media content means treating all those concerned in equal footing. Journalists shouldn't overpraise or undermine anyone in his/her story. They should give equal platform to both sides and all sides. For that, they must incorporate quotes/comments/statements from both sides in their stories. If one side is not available for the statement required for the story, then the journalist must mention that he/she was not available for the comments.

CREDIBILITY:

Credibility is key element for journalist to maintain ethical journalism. Journalists must work hard to make their product credible. For that, they need to focus on fact, figures, sound and solid evidence. They should always concentrate on digging out fact/figures of the particular subject matter if they are to maintain credibility. They have to work hard to substantiate their news reports with required facts and figures/charts/ maps and graphics.

Accuracy and standards for factual reporting

- Reporters are expected to be as accurate as possible given the time allotted to story preparation and the space available, and to seek reliable sources.
- Events with a single eyewitness are reported with attribution. Events with two or more independent eyewitnesses may be reported as fact. Controversial facts are reported with attribution.
- Independent fact-checking by another employee of the publisher is desirable.
- Corrections are published when errors are discovered.
- Defendants at trial are treated only as having "allegedly" committed crimes, until conviction, when their crimes are generally reported as fact (unless, that is, there is serious controversy about wrongful conviction).
- Opinion surveys and statistical information deserve special treatment to communicate in precise terms any conclusions, to contextualize the results, and to specify accuracy, including estimated error and methodological criticism or flaws.

SLANDER & LIBEL CONSIDERATIONS

- Reporting the truth is almost never libel which makes accuracy very important.
- Private persons have privacy rights that must be balanced against the public interest in reporting information about them. Public figures have fewer privacy rights, where reporters are to some extent immune from a civil case if they have reported without malice. However, in most of the countries, law makes it mandatory to journalists that their reports on public figures must be backed by facts.
- Publishers vigorously defend libel lawsuits filed against their reporters, usually covered by libel insurance.

HARM LIMITATION PRINCIPLE

During the normal course of an assignment a reporter might go about—gathering facts and details, conducting interviews, doing research, background checks, taking photos, video taping, recording sound harm limitation deals with the questions of whether everything learned should be reported and, if so, how. This principle of limitation means that some weight needs to be given to the negative consequences of full disclosure, creating a practical and ethical dilemma.

The Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics offers the following advice, which is representative of the practical ideals of most professional journalists. Quoting directly:

- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort.

PURSUIT OF THE NEWS IS NOT A LICENSE FOR ARROGANCE

- Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.
- Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.
- Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.
- Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.
- Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.

PRESENTATION

Ethical standards should not be confused with common standards of quality of presentation, including:

- Correctly spoken or written language (often in a widely spoken and formal dialect.
- Clarity
- Brevity (or depth, depending on the niche of the publisher)

SELF-REGULATION

In addition to codes of ethics, many news organizations maintain an in-house ombudsman whose role is, in part, to keep news organizations honest and accountable to the public. The ombudsman is intended to mediate in conflicts stemming from internal and or external pressures, to maintain accountability to the public for news reported, and to foster self-criticism and to encourage adherence to both codified and uncoded ethics and standards. This position may be the same or similar to the public editor, though public editors also act as a liaison with readers and do not generally become members of the organization of news ombudsmen.

An alternative is a news council (Press Council Nepal in our context), an industry-wide self-regulation body, such as the Press Complaints Commission, set up by UK newspapers and magazines. Such a body is capable perhaps of applying fairly consistent standards, and of dealing with a higher volume of complaints, but may not escape criticisms of being toothless.

ETHICS AND STANDARDS IN PRACTICE

As with other ethical codes, there is a perennial concern that the standards of journalism are being ignored. One of the most controversial issues in modern reporting is media bias, particularly on political issues, but also with regard to cultural and other issues. Sensationalism is also a common complaint. Minor factual errors are also extremely common, as almost anyone who is familiar with the subject of a particular report will quickly realize.

There are also some wider concerns, as the media continue to change, for example that the brevity of news reports and use of soundbites has reduced fidelity to the truth, and may contribute to a lack of needed context for public understanding. From outside the profession, the rise of news management contributes to the real possibility that news media may be deliberately manipulated. Selective reporting (spiking, double standards)) are very commonly alleged against newspapers, and by their nature are forms of bias not easy to establish, or guard against.

Press councils are essentially good for building trust and credibility in the media, for serving as a driver to improve quality standards, for preventing interference from the state and other authorities, and for reducing the number of lawsuits against journalists and media organizations. The main duties of a press council are to:

- A) accept complaints
- B) verify the eligibility of the complaint for the process
- C) review the complaint thoroughly from all angles
- D) serve as a mediator between the plaintiff and the media
- E) take decisions on complaints based on rules and regulations
- F) identify breaches by the media of the code of ethics
- G) secure the transparency of and publicity for all decisions taken
- H) Analyze and comment on trends in the media, and provide guidance regarding norms

- I) set professional standards for journalists
- J) suggest amendments to the code of ethics (if mandated to do so)

Basic ingredients which helps journalist maintain ethics

- * 5ws and 1H
- * Lead/Intro
- * Headlines
- * Inverted pyramid
- * Importance of ABC formula etc.

Use of words

- * Use of familiar and non-technical words
- * Convert technical words into non-technical one
- * Simplify words and make them as simple as possible
- * Use day to day spoken words: instead of saying security personnel, better to say police, army etc
- * Instead of saying advocate/social engineer, better saying lawyer etc.
- * Try to understand local context and use words spoken/written by local people

Use of Sentence

- * Write short, sweet and simple sentences
- * Condense the structure of the sentences
- * Pay attention to full stop, comma etc

Repetition

- * Avoid repetition
- * Ram and Shyam. Don't repeat the names again. Say they etc.
- * Kathmandu and Lalitpur districts. Don't write the full name of districts again. Better to write the two districts/these districts.
- * Say aforesaid/ above mentioned etc.
- * Check, double check and make sure that there is no repetition
- * Use the Active Voice
- * Use definite, specific, concrete language
- * Omit needless words
- * Write in a way that comes naturally
- * Revise and Re-write
- * Use orthodox spelling
- * Do not explain too much
- * Do not construct awkward adverb
- * Do not inject opinion

Reference materials

- 1- BBC guideline
- 2- Wikipedia
- 3- Mass Communication and Law by Kashi Raj Dahal
- 4- Mass Communication and Media Ethics by Nirmala Mani Adhikary
- 5- presscouncilnepal.org
- 6- fnjnepal.org