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Coping Strategies Against Information Disorder

Guidelines for first-liners

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Declaration on copyright:

Chapter 4
Journalism & Media

Target group

These guidelines are targeted towards so-called "first-liners". "First-liners" is an overarching term for all people in direct contact with people who are vulnerable to information disorder, focused on groups in vocational education. Examples of people who fall under the umbrella term are: educators, teachers, trainers, youth counsellors and advisors, social workers and youth workers. This is a non-exhaustive list, however. The scope of this project also includes other people working in the educational, social or health care sector.

Target group

4.1 Introduction

Innovations in communication tools made possible by the Internet's widespread adoption have altered the media landscape. While these developments have undoubtedly improved communication and access to information, they have also given rise to a serious problem: the spread of disinformation. Journalism and the media are more important than ever in the age of information disorder because they are the last line of defence in protecting the truth and spreading only verified information.

When news is purposefully produced or intentionally misleading, it is called "fake news." The quick distribution powers of social media platforms and the decline of institutional safeguards have made this an increasingly prevalent issue. Fake news has far-reaching effects, including on public debate, governmental decision-making, and public faith in the media.

In order to combat the spread of false information and promote the ideals of truth and accuracy, journalism serves as a pillar of democratic societies. Journalists have the duty to check facts, offer unbiased analysis, and show readers other points of view. However, the proliferation of disinformation has presented serious challenges to the established standards of journalism.

The role of artificial intelligence (AI) in the context of misinformation is ambiguous. While AI can provide several intriguing solutions to detect misinformation, its use in the news media presents some ethical concerns. Many people worry that filter bubbles and the reinforcing of prejudice would result from using AI algorithms to curate and recommend information. It is widely believed that it will not be a sensible idea to put all faith in AI to respect journalistic values like objectivity, balance, and independence. In order to protect the credibility and moral standing of the media, it is crucial to strike a balance between technology progress and human judgement.

Media literacy and critical thinking abilities are just as important as journalism and AI when it comes to stopping the spread of misinformation. Media consumers should train themselves to identify trustworthy news outlets, to challenge reported claims, and to recognise the difference between legitimate reporting and propaganda. Individuals can be better equipped to deal with the complexities of the media ecosystem if they have access to education and awareness programmes designed to improve media literacy.

Addressing the problems of misinformation and artificial intelligence in the media and journalism requires widespread cooperation. Accurate reporting, media literacy, and the responsible use of AI tools require concerted efforts from journalists, media outlets, tech firms, policymakers, and education. Through such concerted action, a sustainable and reliable media ecosystem can be established.

In this chapter, we will discuss the foundations of solid reporting and how to spot trustworthy articles from those that are less so.

4.2 Recognising good journalism

The press is often called the "fourth power" in a country. What is meant is that it plays an increasingly crucial role alongside the traditional three branches of state power: the judiciary, the legislature, and the executive. The media claims to be apart from the state, reporting objectively on politics while exercising oversight and criticism when appropriate. Therefore, media plays a critical role in society by informing citizens, fostering public conversation, and keeping those who have influence in check. Because of the development of online media and the democratisation of information, it is becoming more difficult to determine which news outlets can be trusted. The growth of misinformation, sensationalism, and biased reporting are only some of the difficulties brought on by the internet age. That is why it is more important than ever for people to be able to tell credible news outlets apart from the ones which are vulnerable for misinformation.

Understanding how to identify and evaluate high-quality journalism in a dynamic media environment can be accomplished through studying the cornerstones of the profession, including journalistic ethics, critical assessment methods, and cutting-edge technologies. Citizens can acquire the necessary abilities by learning to evaluate information critically and giving attention to issues like source trustworthiness, accuracy, fairness, transparency, and accountability.

Credibility of the source

Credible sources are an essential component of high-quality journalism. Accuracy, verification, and adherence to accepted journalistic practises are characteristics of trustworthy publications.

Credibility assessment of sources needs the careful consideration of several criteria:

- Investigate the credibility and history of the publication or journalist under question. Think about their track record of reliable reporting, their standing in the field, and any awards they may have won. Reliable reporting is frequently an indicator of long-standing, credible news outlets.
- Take a look at the publication's guiding editorial principles. Reliable news outlets adhere to strict guidelines that ensure their coverage is factual, balanced, and objective. Look for a dedication to checking facts, using different sources, and maintaining editorial autonomy.
- Find out how qualified, knowledgeable, and experienced the journalist is. Look into their education, experience, and any affiliations that might influence their objectivity. Credible news organisations employ highly trained journalists who have built up a solid reputation in their field.

- Check to see if the news organisation or individual reporter avoids sensationalism and bias. Credible sources report the facts as they see them, without embellishment or bias. Their goal is to give readers a fair assessment of the situation so that they can make up their own minds.

Precision and verification

The information presented is accurate if it is reliable, factual, and error-free. It equips readers with the knowledge they need to make good choices and gain insight into the world. Credible news stories present data that has been gathered and verified from many sources. Claims can be checked for accuracy by comparing them to data from other reliable sources.

A rigorous review of the following aspects is necessary for determining the accuracy and veracity of journalism:

Search for news stories that use a variety of sources to verify their claims. Journalists reduce their dependence on a potentially biased or untrustworthy source by offering multiple perspectives. The reliability of the investigation is supported by its use of a wide variety of sources.

- Check to see if the article in question gives acknowledgment where credit is due and includes relevant citations. Journalists who care about their readers' ability to independently check the arguments they make should always include explicit references to the material they give.
- Fact-checking procedures are standard practise at reputable news organisations. Before publishing, they take measures to ensure accuracy. Check for evidence that the news organisation uses independent fact-checkers or collaborates with reputable ones. Taking precautions like this shows that you value precision and accountability.
- Journalists who practise ethical standards should be open about their research methods and the credibility of their sources. Verify if the news article explains the methods used to obtain evidence, such as interviews, research, data analysis, or reporting on the ground. This openness helps you determine whether or not the content is trustworthy.
- Journalism that is both reliable and up-to-date covers breaking news as it happens. See if the news source promptly corrects or adds to stories that have already been published. The willingness to fix mistakes and update stories shows a commitment to accuracy.

Fairness and balance

Integrity in reporting means giving readers enough information to draw their own conclusions about an issue or incident. It clarifies various aspects of a subject so that readers can generate well-informed opinions. Journalists can avoid bias and help readers gain a deeper, more nuanced grasp of a topic by offering multiple perspectives. They equip readers with the ability to think critically, weigh pros and contras, and arrive at their own conclusions. When everyone has a chance to have their say, everyone benefits and societal harmony is strengthened.

To determine whether a news story is fair and balanced, it is necessary to evaluate the following criteria:

- Check to see if the article presents a variety of viewpoints on the issue. Try to find some comments, interviews, or remarks from various people who have a stake in the issue, some professionals, and some people with diverse perspectives.
- Evaluate whether the journalist shows signs of bias or opinion in their reporting. Journalists who practise objectivity keep their own views distinct from the news they report. Journalists should present the news without influencing the story with their own biases or opinions.
- Keep an eye out for details about the story's history, setting, and background that provide depth to the reading experience.
- Check to see whether the article gives counterarguments or other opinions, if it incorporates various voices and perspectives, and if it acknowledges the limitations or uncertainties of the topic.

Transparency and independence

Journalists that practise transparency are open about their interviews, their research, and any potential biases they may have. Important qualities include freedom from other influences like politics, business, or ideology. Trust is fostered when readers are given the opportunity to evaluate the information's credibility and any potential biases.

Journalism's openness and impartiality can be uncovered by keeping in mind the suggestions that follow:

- Evaluate the level of transparency with regard to the news organisation's or journalist's sources and methods. Journalists that practise "transparent journalism" explain the processes they used to obtain information, such as interviews, surveys, statistical analyses, and undercover investigations. Readers are better able to assess the legitimacy and dependability of the news because of this openness.
- Check for evidence if the news organisation or individual journalist reveals any potential bias. All relationships, financial or otherwise, that could compromise the

independence of the reporting must be disclosed. You should look into the news organisation to see if it discloses its ownership and any financial influences. The ability to evaluate potential biases or impacts on the media is facilitated by transparent reporting.

- Think about how editorially independent the news organisation or individual journalist is. Journalists practising transparency are unrestrained in their pursuit of news by corporate or governmental interests. Check for evidence that the publication has previously published objective, critically minded journalism.
- Check to see if the news organisation has a transparent process for handling updates and corrections. When mistakes or inaccuracies are made, transparent journalists are quick to apologise and correct the record. Look for evidence that the news organisation is transparent and accountable by updating its audience on any changes or corrections. Having a conversation with readers is a great way to value honesty, openness, and scrutiny from the public.

Responsible journalism

Good journalism, as opposed to sensationalism or clickbait, can be easily identified by its commitment to ethical standards. Honest reporting always seeks to accurately portray events. Journalists make every effort to convey accurate information and double-check their references before publishing. By not propagating false information, rumours, or unsubstantiated claims, journalists practising ethical journalism protect the public's right to know.

Journalists who practise ethics also protect the anonymity and dignity of their sources. When reporting on subjects of public or personal interest, journalists must use discretion. Reporting that adheres to ethical standards does not resort to deception, sensationalism, or breach of privacy, and instead prioritises objectivity and sensitivity in its coverage. Journalists make an effort to show both sides of an argument without favouring one side over the other. Ethical reporting preserves the values of independence and freedom from bias, allowing readers to create their own educated conclusions based on a thorough and nuanced grasp of the topic. Maintaining the credibility and independence of the news media is the responsibility of every journalist, and ethical reporting guarantees that this responsibility is upheld.

Ethical journalists take into account and value the unique identities, backgrounds, and experiences of their readers. Reporters should be careful not to reinforce prejudice or bias in their coverage. Ethical journalism emphasises listening to and including diverse perspectives.

The following considerations are essential for detecting ethical reporting:

- Find out if the news organisation or individual journalist follows professional journalism organisations' standards of ethics. Public support and adherence to these

principles by ethical news organisations is indicative of their dedication to truth in the news.

- Determine if there are definite editorial policies and guidelines in place that encourage honest reporting. Honest news organisations are open about their journalistic principles. Accuracy, impartiality, privacy, conflicts of interest, and other ethical concerns should all be addressed in these policies.
- Analyse the news organization's process for publishing updates and errata. Ethical reporting corrects or updates its content as soon as possible after realising an error has been made. Check for evidence that the news organisation is transparent and accountable by responding to criticism and correcting mistakes in a timely manner.
- Consider whether the news organisation or individual journalist represents a variety of voices and opinions when reporting and look for signs that the organisation treats sensitive information responsibly, avoiding unwarranted injury or invasion of privacy. The effects on people and communities are taken into account in ethical reporting.

Responsibility and corrections

Good journalism can often be identified by its commitment to accountability. Media with integrity corrects and updates quickly, encourages input, and has a solid policy in place for when mistakes are made. Journalism relies on the public's trust, and when errors or inaccuracies are made, the media must be open and honest about fixing them. News organisations may do their part to keep the public informed and stop the spread of misinformation if they admit and correct errors as soon as they are discovered. Accuracy in all activities and the willingness to admit and correct errors are characteristic features of accountability. If a news outlet admits and corrects an error quickly, its readers are more likely to trust it.

How to Spot Journalistic Accountability and Corrections:

- Check for evidence that the news source issues updates or explanations when mistakes are spotted. Ethical media outlets are quick to admit error and take corrective measures. Corrections can be issued in following articles, editor's notes can be published, or the original article might be updated with clarifications.
- Check to see if the news organisation is forthcoming about edits that were made. Watch for openness in admitting and fixing errors.
- Think about if there is a defined policy for when mistakes are made in the news. Guidelines for correcting errors, including when they should be issued and how they should be verified, have been created by reputable news organisations. Having a clear procedure for handling infractions shows that you value responsibility.
- Analyse the publication's reaction to questions and criticisms from its audience. Check for evidence that the publication cares about its readers' opinions and takes action when necessary.

- Consider the publication's history of publishing errata. Examine the news organisation's track record to see if it has admitted and corrected errors in the past. A dedication to accuracy and trustworthiness is demonstrated by an ethical news organisation through their pattern of accountability and corrections.

Think about how open the news organisation is with its methods and evaluate how well the organisation or individual journalists stick to ethical guidelines. Journalistic ethics involve following established norms and principles. Examine the publication or reporter for evidence that they uphold standards of veracity, objectivity, transparency, and accountability.

4.3 Trust in media, institutions & information

Current trends

Historically, journalism has benefited from relatively constant funding as well as consistent professional standards and ethics in many nations. Most people trusted professional news media as trustworthy information providers. The advertising paradigm that has supported journalism for decades has been challenged in recent years by internet enterprises. Meanwhile, public service media have been hit hard by budget cuts while being mainly funded by advertising. Over the past five years, digital advertising has become an increasingly significant source of revenue for media firms, with the share of worldwide advertising expenditure going from 35% in 2016 to 54% in 2021. In 2023, experts predict the number will reach over 60%.

After years of steady erosion, public faith in the media is finally showing signs of stabilising. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the problem of inaccurate and misleading content became so apparent that it was nicknamed a "disinfodemic." Concurrently, multiple studies have shown that the public's faith in various news outlets and other information resources has steadily declined over the previous five years.

The advent of AI and its possible effects on the news industry have further complicated the issue of who to trust. Misinformation and fake news have proliferated at an alarming rate thanks to the widespread use of AI-powered technologies and social media platforms. Because AI can be used to create and spread fake information, it can become difficult to tell which sources to trust. Because of this, less people trust news organisations and other information providers. On the plus side, advances in fact-checking skills have been made possible by AI technologies. Misinformation, trends, and claim verification can all benefit from the use of AI-powered solutions. These innovations may help restore faith by giving people access to trustworthy data.

At the same time, there is an excessive amount of content creators seeking for people's attention in the digital arena. This includes traditional news outlets, new media experts, activists, advertisers, influencers, spin doctors, and politicians. Polarisation in society and politics is putting additional strain on the journalistic standards of objectivity and verification. Furthermore, gatekeeper platforms are playing an increasingly important role in mediating news consumption; these platforms prioritise other forms of information and only recently, under pressure in some places, have begun to share income with news producers.

In this context, questions about journalism's "public good" status are gaining prominence. Journalism, like other public goods, is essential to the development of a robust civic culture. It does this by giving people access to the reliable data and information they need to fully engage in a democratic society. The role of journalism is twofold: that of an impartial watchdog and a driver of public debate. However, in order to serve the public interest,

journalism must be able to thrive economically so that it can generate reliable news and information.

It's worth noting that people's faith in established news outlets appears to be influenced by elements such as culture, politics, and history. There can be significant variation in people's trust in the media and other institutions. Perceptions of trustworthiness can be affected by variables such as one's political leanings, life events, and exposure to differing points of view. Information has become more dispersed in the digital age, with people seeking sources that confirm their pre-existing views. This has the potential to intensify polarisation and trust differentials.

Despite the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic may have temporarily halted or reversed eroding confidence in certain locations, trust is likely to remain fragile, which has serious consequences for the long-term viability of independent media and the health of democratic politics.

The Edelman Trust Barometer

The Edelman Trust Barometer is a worldwide study conducted annually to gauge the level of public confidence in a variety of organisations, including the media. 59 percent of those polled across 28 nations agreed or strongly agreed that journalists intentionally mislead the public, and that news outlets care more about promoting a certain political perspective than informing the public. A little solace could be that traditional media still has 18 percentage points more trust than social media. The latest Reuters Institute Digital News Report indicates a comparable decline in trust in the news media across 18 nations over the course of the last five years. According to the report, countries like France and the United Kingdom have extremely low levels of trust in the media.
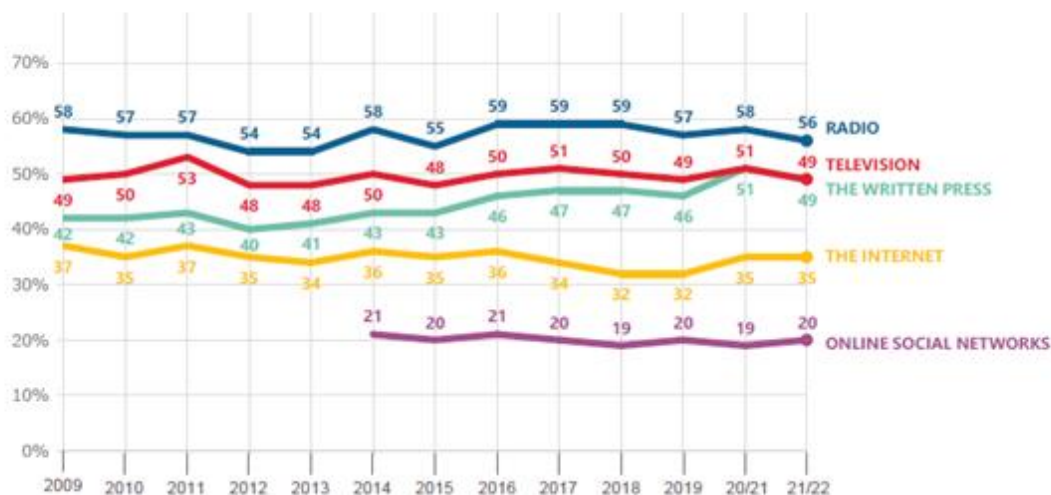
Eurobarometer

Media credibility is routinely investigated as part of the European Commission's Eurobarometer survey series. Since the Standard Eurobarometer in the winter of 2020–2021, there has been a small decrease in trust in conventional media.

With 56% of respondents saying they "tend to trust" radio (-2) and 38% of respondents saying they "tend not to trust" radio (-3), radio is the most trusted medium. The last time that trust was at this low level was in the autumn of 2015 (55%).

Not quite half of respondents (49%) say they "tend to trust" television, while nearly as many (47%) (+2%) say they "tend not to trust" this medium.

While 49% of Europeans say they trust the written press (a drop of 2% over the winter of 2020/21), about the same amount (45%, up +3) say they "tend not to trust" the media.
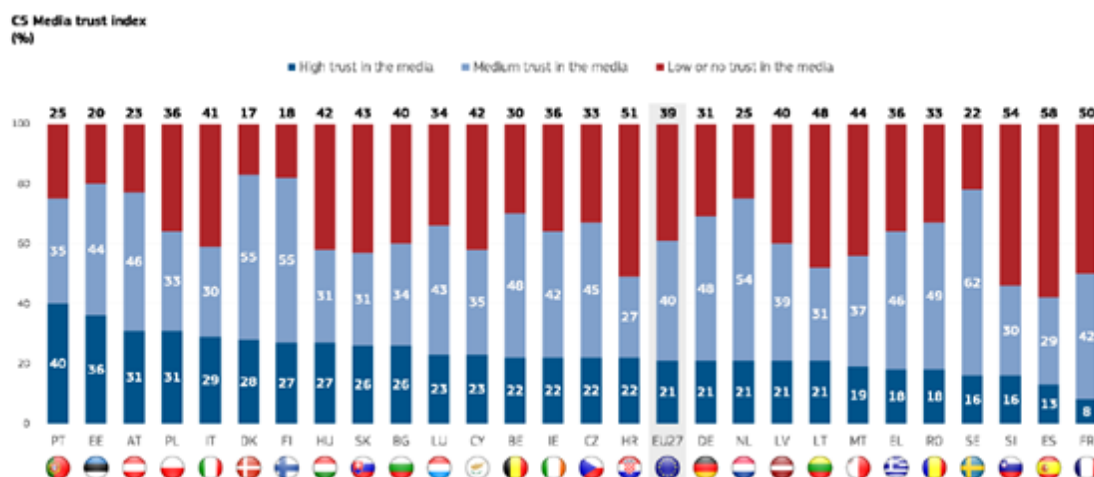

Source: Standard Eurobarometer 96 (Winter 2021-2022)

Media Trust Index

The trust in the media across Europe (as measured by an index based on the five outlets evaluated) is slightly lower than it was in the winter of 2020–2021. While the percentage of respondents who have a "high" level of trust in the media has remained unchanged at 21% (since winter 2020-2021), the percentage who have a "medium" level of trust has decreased by 2%, and the percentage who have a "low" or "no" level of trust has increased by 2% to 39%.

Spain (58%), Slovenia (54%), and Croatia (51%), among other EU Member States, have the highest shares of respondents who have poor or no faith in the media.

In 12 EU Member States (down from 17 in winter 2020-2021) the largest proportion of respondents have a "medium" level of trust in the media, with this level most widespread in Sweden (62%), Denmark, Finland (both 55%) and the Netherlands (54%).

CS Media trust index
(%)

Source: Standard Eurobarometer 96 (Winter 2021-2022)

Digital News Report

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism releases its annual Digital News Report, which analyses topics like news consumption and public faith in the media. It examines worldwide tendencies but also provides regional specifics for Europe. The reports underline the influence of social media on news consumption patterns and the dwindling faith in traditional media.

According to the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2020, public service media enjoy a great deal of trust, especially in Northern Europe. Yet, there was a constraint: "criticisms from the extremes do seem to be chipping away at this confidence in many countries, especially when combined with anti-elitist rhetoric from populist politicians…Though trust remains high, distrust of public service media is growing and is often higher than for many other news outlets. Confidence in public service media appears to have risen one year later, coinciding with the start of the COVID-19 epidemic. "We have seen increased consumption of credible news outlets in a lot of nations, particularly those with strong and independent public service media," the Digital News Report 2021 affirmed. "The pattern is less clear outside Western Europe, in countries where the Coronavirus crisis has dominated the media agenda less, or where other political and social issues have played a bigger role." Public service media websites, according to the survey, performed very well. This may be because they leverage their existing audiences on television and radio to drive traffic to their websites, where they can find more in-depth content. It was noted, however, that these developments are more common in countries where public broadcasters were previously held in high esteem.

Despite this, there is still a lot of faith in genuine public service media, even in the face of pervasive misinformation and viral falsehoods. At the same time, attracting a younger

audience is a major issue for public service media. Data from eight countries, collectively representing a wide range of public service media traditions, were analysed for a 2019 Reuters Institute study. In many nations, younger people and those with less formal education are more likely to rely on news discovered on platforms like Facebook and YouTube, while older people and those with a greater level of education are more likely to consume public service news both online and off. Young adults (those in the age range of 18 to 34) are more likely to appreciate traditional news brands when they are delivered digitally, but they still prefer social media sites like Facebook and YouTube to public service media websites when it comes to getting their news. The survey suggests that "even as the move to a more digital, mobile, and platform-dominated media environment continues," public service media may be engaging younger viewers even less frequently today than in the past.

Source: Edelman Trust Barometer

Conclusions

When individuals lack trust in mainstream media, they may feel that the information presented by these sources is biased, manipulated, or incomplete. As a result, they may turn to alternative sources of information, such as social media, online forums, or websites that cater to specific ideologies or interests. These non-traditional sources often lack the same journalistic standards, fact-checking processes, and editorial oversight as established media outlets.

In such alternative sources, the content may be driven by personal opinions, hidden agendas, or the desire for sensationalism, rather than a commitment to accuracy and reliability. Misinformation, conspiracy theories, rumours, and propaganda can easily circulate in these spaces, as there are limited mechanisms to verify the information or hold the sources accountable. This can lead to individuals being exposed to misleading or false

information, which can shape their perspectives, beliefs, and actions based on incomplete or inaccurate information.

People are also less likely to pay for news in countries where trust between citizens is poor. Trust plays a crucial role in determining individuals' willingness to pay for news services. When trust between citizens is low, it often reflects a broader erosion of trust in institutions, including the media. In such environments, people may be sceptical about the quality, objectivity, and reliability of the news they receive. As a result, they may be less inclined to invest their financial resources in subscribing to news outlets or paying for journalistic content.

Trust acts as a form of social capital that helps foster cooperation, shared values, and collective action. When trust is low, people may rely more on informal networks, word-of-mouth, or alternative sources of information to fulfil their news needs. In these situations, the perceived value of paying for news may diminish, as individuals may question whether the news they receive justifies the cost.

Additionally, low trust can also contribute to a fragmented society, with differing narratives and perspectives, further reducing the perceived value of paying for news that may not align with one's own beliefs or interests. The lack of consensus and shared understanding may create an environment where people prioritise seeking information that confirms their existing views, rather than engaging with a diverse range of news sources.

4.4 Sources of information & journalist ethics

Reliable sources

In the era of information disorder, it is crucial to rely on reliable sources of information to ensure accuracy and credibility. While the spread of misinformation has made it challenging to discern trustworthy sources, there are still several outlets and platforms that uphold journalistic principles and adhere to rigorous fact-checking and verification processes:

- Established News Organisations: Well-known and reputable news organisations with a history of quality journalism often prioritise accuracy and objectivity. Examples include The New York Times, BBC, Reuters, The Guardian, Associated Press (AP). These organisations employ professional journalists and adhere to strict editorial standards, making them reliable sources of news.
- Public Broadcasters: Publicly funded broadcasters have a commitment to impartiality and accuracy. They often provide in-depth reporting, analysis, and investigative journalism on a wide range of topics.
- Fact-Checking Organisations: Independent fact-checking organisations play a vital role in debunking misinformation and verifying the accuracy of claims. Examples include FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, Snopes, and International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). These organisations assess the validity of statements made by politicians, public figures, and news stories to provide objective evaluations.
- Academic and Research Institutions: Universities and research institutions often produce valuable and credible information on various subjects. Scholarly articles, research papers, and studies published in reputable academic journals can provide in-depth analysis and evidence-based insights.
- Government Sources: Official government websites, reports, and statements can be reliable sources of information, particularly when it comes to public policy, legislation, and official statistics. However, it is essential to be critical and mindful of potential biases or political motivations in government communications!
- Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs): Renowned NGOs, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, World Health Organisation (WHO), and United Nations (UN) agencies, often produce reliable reports and data on various global issues. These organisations focus on research, advocacy, and promoting human rights, making their information valuable for understanding complex social and humanitarian issues.
- Specialised Publications and Subject Matter Experts: Subject-specific publications, trade journals, and industry experts often provide authoritative information within their respective domains. These sources can offer specialised insights, analysis, and research findings in fields such as science, technology, finance, and health.

Journalist ethics

The pursuit of news collection, reporting, and dissemination is governed by a set of rules and guidelines known as journalistic ethics. There are a few universally accepted concepts of journalistic ethics, even if specific standards may vary slightly from one organisation or location to another. Key principles to follow are as follows:

- Journalists have a responsibility to their audiences to present information that is accurate, trustworthy, and verifiable. They need to double-check their information and quickly fix any mistakes they find.
- Journalists are expected to report the news and information they find without showing any type of bias or favouritism. They need to make a distinction between objective reporting and opinions.
- Journalists should not let their integrity or accuracy of their reporting be influenced by any other parties, whether political, commercial, or otherwise. They need to prevent conflicts of interest and stand up against any attempts at manipulation.
- Journalists should strive for objectivity and provide a range of viewpoints while covering stories of public interest. They need to provide the opportunity for those who are the subject of criticism to respond or express their side of the story.
- When reporting on sensitive personal problems, such as those involving victims of crime, accidents, or trauma, journalists have a specific responsibility to treat such people's right to privacy with respect. They should not cause anyone any needless pain or suffering.
- Journalists should be forthright in disclosing the identities of their interview subjects, the organisations they are affiliated with, and the sources of the material they use in their stories. Separating news from advertising or sponsored content is essential.
- Journalists should take responsibility for their job and be open to constructive criticism. They need to be willing to take criticism, give the other side a chance to respond, and use appropriate editorial standards.
- Journalists have an obligation to the public to ensure that their work is accurate and fair. They need to encourage democratic principles, widen people's access to knowledge, and help build an educated populace. They should steer clear of inciting bias or spreading false information for attention.

These guidelines provide a solid foundation for responsible reporting, but journalists must also keep in mind the unique problems posed by the rapidly changing media landscape and the advent of the digital age.

The SPJ Code of Ethics which we present below has been voluntarily embraced by thousands of journalists, regardless of place or platform, and is widely used in newsrooms and classrooms as a guide for ethical behaviour. The code is intended not as a set of "rules" but as a resource for ethical decision-making.

Society of Professional Journalists
C(SPJ)DE of ETHICS

PREAMBLE

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. An ethical journalist acts with integrity.

The Society declares these four principles as the foundation of ethical journalism and encourages their use in its practice by all people in all media.

SEEK TRUTH AND REPORT IT

Ethical journalism should be accurate and fair. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

Journalists should:

- Take responsibility for the accuracy of their work. Verify information before releasing it. Use original sources whenever possible.
- Remember that neither speed nor format excuses inaccuracy.
- Provide context. Take special care not to misrepresent or oversimplify in promoting, previewing or summarizing a story.
- Gather, update and correct information throughout the life of a news story.
- Be cautious when making promises, but keep the promises they make.
- Identify sources clearly. The public is entitled to as much information as possible to judge the reliability and motivations of sources.
- Consider sources' motives before promising anonymity. Reserve anonymity for sources who may face danger, retribution or other harm, and have information that cannot be obtained elsewhere. Explain why anonymity was granted.
- Diligently seek subjects of news coverage to allow them to respond to criticism or allegations of wrongdoing.
- Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information unless traditional, open methods will not yield information vital to the public.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable. Give voice to the voiceless.
- Support the open and civil exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- Recognize a special obligation to serve as watchdogs over public affairs and government. Seek to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open, and that public records are open to all.
- Provide access to source material when it is relevant and appropriate.
- Boldly tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience. Seek sources whose voices we seldom hear.
- Avoid stereotyping. Journalists should examine the ways their values and experiences may shape their reporting.
- Label advocacy and commentary.
- Never deliberately distort facts or context, including visual information. Clearly label illustrations and re-enactments.
- Never plagiarize. Always attribute.

MINIMIZE HARM

Ethical journalism treats sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect.

Journalists should:

- Balance the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance or undue intrusiveness.
- Show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage. Use heightened sensitivity when dealing with juveniles, victims of sex crimes, and sources or subjects who are inexperienced or unable to give consent. Consider cultural differences in approach and treatment.
- Recognize that legal access to information differs from an ethical justification to publish or broadcast.
- Realize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than public figures and others who seek power, influence or attention. Weigh the consequences of publishing or broadcasting personal information.
- Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity, even if others do.
- Balance a suspect's right to a fair trial with the public's right to know. Consider the implications of identifying criminal suspects before they face legal charges.
- Consider the long-term implications of the extended reach and permanence of publication. Provide updated and more complete information as appropriate.

ACT INDEPENDENTLY

The highest and primary obligation of ethical journalism is to serve the public.

Journalists should:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived. Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and avoid political and other outside activities that may compromise integrity or impartiality, or may damage credibility.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; do not pay for access to news. Identify content provided by outside sources, whether paid or not.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers, donors or any other special interests, and resist internal and external pressure to influence coverage.
- Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two. Prominently label sponsored content.

BE ACCOUNTABLE AND TRANSPARENT

Ethical journalism means taking responsibility for one's work and explaining one's decisions to the public.

Journalists should:

- Explain ethical choices and processes to audiences. Encourage a civil dialogue with the public about journalistic practices, coverage and news content.
- Respond quickly to questions about accuracy, clarity and fairness.
- Acknowledge mistakes and correct them promptly and prominently. Explain corrections and clarifications carefully and clearly.
- Expose unethical conduct in journalism, including within their organizations.
- Abide by the same high standards they expect of others.

The SPJ Code of Ethics is a statement of abiding principles supported by additional explanations and position papers (at spj.org) that address changing journalistic practices. It is not a set of rules, rather a guide that encourages all who engage in journalism to take responsibility for the information they provide, regardless of medium. The code should be read as a whole; individual principles should not be taken out of context. It is not, nor can it be under the First Amendment, legally enforceable.

Source: Society of Professional Journalists

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