

THE PRESS

*A user's guide to interacting with the press in
the United States of America.*



**SOCIETY OF
PROFESSIONAL
JOURNALISTS**



all things journalism

The **Society of Professional Journalists** is one of the oldest and largest professional journalism organizations in the United States.

SPJ is best known for its **Code of Ethics**, which is a statement of abiding principles the organization believes represent good journalism.

As SPJ celebrates its **15th annual Ethics Week**, the organization wants to offer some tips and suggestions to the public about the profession and how to raise concerns with local news organizations.

What the Public Should Expect From the Press

By Alex Veeneman

In today's world, we want to make sure everyone is at their best. Journalists are no exception. Principled journalists believe an informed and educated public helps make the world a better place.

We are not your enemy. We are conscious of our roles. We know it's crucial to be trusted by the public — and at the foundation of trust is honesty.

Journalists will tell you what they've learned about events and what it means for the public. If they don't know something, they'll tell you. If they can't verify something, they'll say so. They'll cross every "T" and dot every "I." They'll make sure the public has the most up-to-date information available. They know it is better to be right than be first. Also, they won't force their personal beliefs on the public because people should be allowed to make up their own minds based on fact.

Similarly, journalists want the public to be honest with them. If a person has a question about a story, they should ask. If a person thinks the journalist got something wrong or missed something, they should reach out. If a person wants a journalist to explain something about his or her research, they should ask.

It is said that honesty is the best policy, and journalists should be honest with the public.

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Raising Concerns About Journalism

By Dr. Chris Roberts

The 101-year-old quote from famed newspaperman William Allen White still stands: “There are three things that no one can do to the entire satisfaction of anyone else: poke the fire, make love and edit a newspaper.”

Let’s just focus on the third thing, knowing that the first two things rarely come up in polite society and the third thing isn’t just about newspapers anymore. Complaining about news organizations, whether content or methods, is as old as America itself.

What’s new is the internet’s ability to make complaining easy — often immediately under the offending piece. Newer still is the propagandistic term “fake news,” which means whatever politicians want it to mean when they complain about information they don’t like.

Journalism’s response is to be more transparent — to show and explain journalists’ work, acknowledge any biases and publish comments adjacent to online stories.

The result, along with shrinking newsrooms and faster deadlines that lead to more errors, is that complaints about news coverage are at an all-time high. But not every complaint is a good one.

To be better at raising concerns about news coverage, keep these ideas in mind:

1. Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity.

Hanlon's Razor matters in the news business. Unlike doctors who bury their mistakes, journalists' mistakes show up for all to see. Like good doctors, good journalists hate mistakes that cause pain.

But don't automatically assume that a mistake was made on purpose or for nefarious reasons, particularly if the mistake goes against your personal beliefs. It could be an honest mistake caused by deadline, lack of full understanding, lack of caffeine, bad information from a source or just a quick trip to the mental zoo.

It is a capital mistake to assume motive when registering a complaint.

2. Don't confuse opinion with fact.

Consider the differences between objective and subjective issues before you complain. Research shows that news organizations are quicker to fix factual mistakes. They're less likely to "fix" subjective mistakes, which may not be mistakes but honest differences of opinion. That's what story comments and letters to the editor are for.

Be sure to differentiate between fact and opinion, and then go back to tip No. 1.

3. Be specific.

Journalists' work is concrete, as they turn ideas into video, text and words. When you complain, be precise about what you find incorrect or otherwise troubling. It also helps when you provide evidence to support your criticism.

4. Know the time, and start with the journalist.

Newsrooms are usually busiest in the afternoons, as they sprint toward broadcast times and deadlines. Reaching out during non-deadline hours is best.

And when you reach out, start with the individual you believe is responsible for the error. If you're not satisfied, then take it up the ladder.

5. Give us a break on technical stuff.

Jacksonville State University's marching band is famous for its 20J collection, and some members may become angry if you call it a mere tuba. Trust me: The world knows it as a tuba, and calling it a 20J just confuses most people.

Journalists make complicated issues easier to understand, and that requires taking shortcuts. Research shows that experts quoted in stories are more likely to not like what is published—for this reason, and because people opposed to them may be quoted in the same story. Keep journalists honest when they make big mistakes, but give journalists some latitude when they turn the complex into the simple.

6. Keep context in mind.

Not every story, especially turn-of-the-screw stories on long-running issues, will be straight up-and-down fair. The story may seem one-sided because the other side couldn't be reached or refused comment, or it was the defense's turn in a trial, etc. Before complaining, consider the individual story in the context of all the coverage of an issue.

7. Consider the motives of those who would tell you to complain.

The airwaves are filled with politicians and others who, for their own gain, tell you to complain against the media. Be more suspicious when their complaints are not specific (see tip No. 3.)

And it also helps to appreciate the differences between specific news organizations. As Professor Ralph Hanson reminds us, there is no "they" in mass media. The United States has

thousands of local TV stations, 15,000 radio stations, 1,300 daily newspapers, thousands of magazines and skillions of web sites, so lumping them into a single “media” is wrong. As I tell my students: Most people who call out “the media” as a singular entity are either fools or trying to sell you something.

8. Keep it civil.

The Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics says journalists should “support the open and civil exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.” That suggests two things:

–Journalists don’t necessarily agree with everything they publish. They serve as a platform for ideas, and a good journalist can competently and fairly cover topics with which they disagree. Don’t assume journalists buy in to the ideas of the people they cover and quote.

–Civility matters. If you follow some of these previous ideas, then you should be less likely to come off like a jerk when you contact the news organization. Treat people how you want to be treated. Vent before you write.

9. Use the SPJ Code.

Part of the Code’s purpose is to help the public understand the journalistic standards that we believe best serve society. But know that, with some exceptions, most of the Code is aspirational, and we all fall short of our aspirations sometimes.

Even if you’re not a journalist, read the Code to see what most right-thinking people would agree constitutes good journalism practice. Use the Code as a basis for complaining.

10. Finally, revel in the ability to complain.

Journalists who seek to be ethical and transparent are ready and willing to listen to you.

Compare ethical journalism to government, churches, and plenty of business, and you'll see that journalism is much more open and therefore open to criticism than many other American institutions. (Can you imagine your local hospital, police department, university or any government agency willingly listing its mistakes where everyone can see them?)

Judge news organizations — and other institutions — on how they respond to fair criticism.

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How Ethical Codes Protect Democracy and Public Debate

By Andrew M. Seaman

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution grants freedom of the press to every person in the country. No license is needed for a person to call themselves a member of the press.

The lack of regulation over the press may seem troubling to some people, but it's an elemental feature of a healthy democracy. The right to take up pen, pencil, camera or microphone allows any person to hold his or her government accountable and to share ideas with other citizens. Utilizing the First Amendment could be as simple as sharing thoughts on social media or as complex as running a news organization.

For those people who call themselves journalists with the aim of providing their fellow citizens with the truth, the Society of Professional Journalists explains the ideals of responsible journalism in its code of ethics. For nearly 100 years, journalists have used the code of ethics endorsed by SPJ to craft responsible and impactful journalism.

SPJ's Code of Ethics is a document that describes what the work of responsible journalists should look like during the reporting, publishing and broadcasting of their stories. The document is not a set a rules. Instead, journalists should work to fulfill the spirit of the document. When a journalist or news organization falls short of those goals, they should admit to their mistakes and shortcomings. If their actions are especially egregious, they should expect others to call out their mistakes, too.

The informal system of regulation of the press allows members of the public to judge news organizations and journalists based on their records while preserving people's First Amendment right to offer their own rebuttals and publish or broadcast their thoughts.

The SPJ Code of Ethics is one tool to judge the work of journalists and news organizations.

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CODE 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.
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The SPJ Code of Ethics is a statement of abiding principles supported by additional explanations and position papers 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.

Sigma Delta Chi's first Code of Ethics was borrowed from the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1926. In 1973, Sigma Delta Chi wrote its own code, which was revised in 1984, 1987, 1996 and 2014.

The Code is available in nine languages and is used by journalists around the world.

PRESS FOR ETHICS

Please visit spj.org for more information about SPJ, ethical journalism and other issues involving the press.

