

Ethics policy

for the Chattanooga Times Free Press

Nothing is more sacred to us than the readers' trust in us to tell the truth, to be accurate, fair and impartial. We must be free of conflicts of interest. We must avoid the perception of conflicts of interest. As journalists we cannot simply use these standards as slogans; they must be a living truth evident in everything we say, do and print. Any failure, by any one of us, to follow these journalistic truths undermines the credibility of

our newspaper as an entity, of each of us as individuals and of our craft.

What follows is a guide — a way of helping you determine what you should do as you go about your job. It does not foresee every action or situation. It simply gives guidance along the way. Any time — every time — you find yourself wondering what is the correct thing to do, check this policy and talk to the executive editor. Seek advice.

“Seek truth and report it. Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.”

— Society of Professional Journalists

Gathering the News

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.

- Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.

- Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.

- Always question sources' motives before the executive editor promises anonymity. Only the executive editor can grant such a status and will clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. We must keep our promises.

- Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should

not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.

- Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.

- Avoid misleading re-enactments or staged news events. If re-enactment is necessary to tell a story, label it.

- Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information.

- Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.

- Examine our own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.

- Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.

- Support the open exchange of views, even views you find repugnant.

- Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.

- Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.

- Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two. Paid advertisements should be labeled and should not resemble news reports.

- Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

- Anything that is a matter of public record should be reportable in the newspaper or on our website. Subscribers pay us a monthly subscription fee so we will gather all this public information for them.

- Correct errors immediately, both in the newspaper and online.

Plagiarism

IT'S A SIMPLE POLICY: DON'T. If respecting the intellectual property of your fellow journalists isn't a strong enough reason to stop you from stealing their work, consider this: If you thought a sentence was funny, clever or cute enough to steal, someone else probably thought it was pretty good, too. In the Google age, it can take just seconds to catch you stealing work.

Sometimes when a reporter is “matching” a story from another source, he or she can accidentally copy a sentence or phrase without realizing it. To prevent this problem, it can never hurt to add “information from The Washington Post was used in this report.” It takes only seconds, and it helps cover any inadvertent copying you may have done.

NOTE: In preparing this document, we have borrowed frequently from the standards and practices of many other institutions and newspapers, including the Society of Professional Journalists, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Associated Press Managing Editors and The Poynter Institute.

Political activities

We support your voting privileges. However, because media companies are expected to be nonpartisan, the conduct of employees is subject to special scrutiny and criticism. News personnel (reporters, copy editors, writers, photographers) and supervisory personnel must refrain from participating in active partisan politics.

ACTIVE PARTISAN POLITICS INCLUDE

- Active support of candidates for public office
- Service as a delegate to political conventions, as a

member of party committees, or candidates' committees

- Signing of endorsements of candidates

- Serving as a candidate for public office

- Endorsing, recommending or participating in any organization whose primary purpose is to advance a politically sensitive cause.

- Donating to any candidate or public issue up for a vote where newspapers report both sides.

- News employees may not seek elected office or serve in a leadership capacity with any political party (i.e., Democrats,

Republicans, Libertarians).

This rule also applies to local political party groups (for example, Hamilton County Republican Party) or affiliated organizations (Young Republicans, Young Democrats, etc.).

- Employees should not display yard signs, bumper stickers or wear buttons or clothing in support of any candidate, federal, state or local. Likewise, employees should not work in the campaign of any candidate or carry or sign petitions in support of any cause. Because of the potential appearance

of impropriety, employees should use care when donating to any group that might be perceived as political or when attending any rally or event with political overtones. If your spouse chooses to sport such a bumper sticker on his or her car, find another ride.

- No employee should identify himself or herself as a Chattanooga newspaper employee while engaging in political activities. In addition, no newsroom employee is permitted to actively solicit votes for any political candidate at any time.

Paying our way

“Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public’s right to know.”

— Society of Professional Journalists

If the “public’s right to know” is truly the highest and only interest journalists at our newspaper strive to serve, then journalists must reject all gifts, services and food offered by sources or organizations in the community that are not available to the general public. The only exception is at sporting events; working press may consume food and drinks in areas set aside for journalists.

NO FREEBIES

Otherwise, turning down free bags and meals should be obvious. Refusing compli-

mentary rounds of golf during a course review or rejecting meals on the house during a restaurant review should be standard practice.

“I don’t know how many times I’ve heard from journalists that ‘I can’t be bought for a meal.’ Which, of course, begs the question: What could you be bought for,” said Aly Colon, of The Poynter Institute. “A Mercedes-Benz? An all-expense paid trip to Disney World? A free trip to Tuscany? Or even a wine company-sponsored trip to the California vineyards?”

PRIVATE CITIZENS

Things get more complicated, however, when private citizens offer gifts. Is it better to accept a cup of coffee from a source during an interview at her home and not appear rude or reject the coffee on the grounds of staying ethically neutral?

What about if during the course of covering a county commission meeting a cake is brought out to celebrate the retirement of a secretary? Should a journalist

automatically reject the cake because it is from a government official or should she eat a small piece along with everyone else at the meeting in honor of the secretary? In these cases, perhaps the standard should be: If you can eat it standing up, feel free to accept it. Thus a cup of coffee, a glass of water or a small piece of cake would be acceptable — especially if rejecting the offer and being rude would strongly outweigh the ethical consequences of accepting the small offer. This policy, however, should not be stretched to the point of eating entire meals, claiming you can balance your plate on one hand and eat a steak dinner standing up.

NONFOOD GIFTS

All other nonfood gifts should be rejected if they are not directly related to performing your job. Thus, a free program from a play would be acceptable since the reviewer needs to know how to spell a name properly. A notebook with Kurt Busch on the cover should not be accepted — the supply drawer in the office

provides plenty of plain white notebooks. If a company sends free gifts through the mail, the reporter should donate the items to charity.

ITEMS FOR REVIEW SERVICES/TRAVEL

Free items such as CDs, DVDs or video games that are needed for reviewing purposes may be accepted for the purpose of writing the review and then submitted to charity. Items that are not reviewed should be donated to charity.

The same rules apply to services and travel. Unless the hair salon is giving free pedicures to every one, journalists should not accept free or reduced services. Journalists also should reject all discounts such as Nike offering a discount to journalists for golf clubs.

There is no ethical reason for a writer to pay less for a driver than a lawyer. Airline discounts and free hotel rooms also should be rejected when traveling out of town to cover an event. If the paper won’t pay full price to cover something, then it won’t get covered.

Membership in civic organizations/connections

Journalists can be an active part of their community, but we should be aware of some pitfalls. We are asked to remain neutral on community issues, but the community is our home, and we can't help but have our opinions. We should declare any conflicts that arise.

■ A Rotary club member should not cover the meeting. And don't accept the post of publicity chairman in the club.

■ Be careful about joining organizations, especially if it is related to your beat. The theater reviewer should not be a member of a local theater, no matter how much he or she wants to be on stage.

■ Don't take a stand on issues in the area you cover. It's fine to join a church, but don't report on a controversy in the church in which you belong. Stay away from being involved in religious lobbying organizations.

■ Let common sense guide you when petitions come your way — don't sign them. Don't make donations to fundraisers with hot agendas or political parties. Working with a nonprofit group such as Goodwill is fine, but remember to exclude yourself from any capacity which has to do with writing, layout or placement of that story on a page.

■ Don't purchase stock in a local company, especially if you are a financial reporter or editor, or a company you may have to cover if a controversy arises.

■ Don't exploit your connection to the newspaper by using threats, for example, to resolve a utility billing error or get better concert seats.

“You, as the leader, walk and talk your newsroom's values.”

— Jill Geisler, Poynter Institute on leadership management

Don't look for another job while on the clock. If offered a job by the city, school or another business, the reporter should let an editor know.

■ Be careful what you say in public and even out in the main newsroom about an organization, a political candidate or even a reader who may be a constant caller. Even staff from other departments might walk through at the time we are venting about a particular source.

■ Also, keep in mind to be careful about the signs, calendars or pictures around our desks. Members of the public pass through our newsroom, and we don't want to send the message that we may be biased. Even staff from other departments can overhear us venting. Go in an office and vent away.

■ Even during off hours, journalists should be careful about the message they send to the public. Wearing a

T-shirt poking fun at a community controversy or even a bumper sticker taking a stand on an issue can send a wrong message.

■ A good idea is to stop and think twice. Stand back and look at what you are about to do, wear and say. Ask yourself: Will this tarnish the credibility of the newspaper?

■ Most answers are common sense; if not, just ask your co-workers. Get a consensus, ask your editor and don't let something come back to haunt you. Once lost, it's very difficult to regain readers' trust or restore credibility to the newspaper.

BE A LEADER

Jill Geisler, leadership management leader at The Poynter Institute, offers this: “Think about your newsroom's e-mail exchanges or your offhand conversations about people and subjects you cover. What's the tone? Is there sniping? ... Smart-aleck comments? Nonstop cynicism? Think again: What impression might someone take away from that reading? Would this kind of transparency reveal the perception or reality of bias? Or might it broadcast your journalistic professionalism to even the most skeptical eye? You, as the leader, walk and talk your newsroom's values.”

Relationships/disclosure/conflicts of interest

Numerous published ethics policies refer to staff connections, relationships and conflicts of interest. A number also cite disclosure, but relatively few offer insight into outside disclosure

of potential conflicts.

News employees should avoid participating in any story from which you or a close relative might benefit, or reasonably be perceived to benefit, either financially

or otherwise. On disclosing conflicts of interest, managers may elect to disclose the conflict within the story rather than remove the reporter from it, provided the conflict is deemed to be very minor.

Photography

With new technology available to photojournalists, alteration of photographs is unacceptable.

However, minor dodging and burning or color correction of areas in the photograph that do not change the content are acceptable. Correction or removing of dirt or dust spots may be done. Adding or removing elements that do not realistically represent what the camera captured is forbidden.

APPROPRIATE SUBJECT MATTER

On occasion, the subject matter of a photograph may require discussion, for example, photographs with the potential to offend community standards through the inclusion of nudity, obscene gestures or offensive cultural elements. Photographs that may offend community standards include gruesome or emotionally distressing photographs.

LABELING

A photograph that has been manipulated (electronically or otherwise) must be labeled as a photo illustration (meaning the photo was set up) or as an electronically manipulated photo (example: removing or creating elements in the illustration).

Overall, the photographer should be accurate and comprehensive in the representation of subjects, and should not intentionally contribute to, or seek to alter or influence events that are being photographed.

Photographs should not be staged.

Connections and relationships

News employees are encouraged to participate in the community through volunteer work, membership in civic organizations and the like. However, working in the community carries the potential of conflict of interest, or more to the point, the appearance of conflict of interest.

■ No newsroom employee will be assigned to write a story, take photographs, edit material, write a headline, design a page or make news judgments related to an organization he or she may belong to or actively participate in, nor should he or she accept such an assignment. The exception may be made if a) the story/photo/page is deemed purely informational and entirely uncontroversial by the editor or two other senior editors; b) if the relationship between the employee and the organization is transitory; or c) emergency circumstances require temporary suspension (see disclosure of potential conflicts of interests).

■ No newsroom employee will take a leadership role in any organization about which he or she potentially may be

pressed to make an editorial judgment.

■ No newsroom employee will perform public relations duties for any organization.

■ Any news staff member who has a close relative, close friend or someone with whom he or she has a romantic involvement who is either running for office or working on a campaign will not be assigned to cover the story.

■ No newsroom employee will be assigned to write, photograph, report, edit material or make news judgments related to an organization, company or individual with which he or she has a direct financial relationship, nor should he or she accept such an assignment. A direct financial relationship would include employment, whether full time, part time, contract,

freelance or other; and direct investment of stocks.

■ No employee should directly invest in any corporation, company or entity that he or she covers or is likely to cover, and no employee should be assigned to cover any corporation, company or entity that he or she has directly invested in. "Directly invest" should be taken to mean the intentional investment in a specific company, not investment in a mutual fund. Specifically exempted from this rule is coverage of the Chattanooga Times Free Press and its properties, regardless of investment.

■ Newsroom employees will disclose any and all outside employment, regardless of status (full time, part time, contract, freelance or other) to the editor.

■ No newsroom employee will perform work for a direct competitor.

■ Newsroom employees should not be assigned to write, photograph, report or edit material or make news judgments about friends or family members or about any organizations that those friends and family members are active in, nor should employees accept such an assignment.

■ Should an employee's family member decide to undertake a course that could lead to a real or perceived conflict, the employee will immediately bring it to the attention of his or her supervisor. Examples would include the spouse's intention to run for office or accept a position that could pose a conflict, post a political sign, etc.

Potential conflicts of interest

If a newsroom employee feels uncomfortable about a potential conflict situation involving either that employee or another, he or she should inform the editor privately about those concerns.

The editor will be the arbiter of whether a situation poses the risk of appearing to the general public to be a conflict of interest.

Should circumstances force the temporary suspension of a portion of this policy with the permission of the editor — such as only one reporter, photographer or editor being available for a breaking news event — the newspaper will include a disclaimer as an

editor's note at the end of the story: In the interest of full disclosure, we note that reporter Jane Doe is a member of The Goose Pimple Junction Quilting Guild.

In the event of a major suspension of the policy, reflecting a greater concern that a conflict of interest may be seen by the public, the editor may decide to a) place the editor's note at or near the beginning of the story; or b) write a longer explanation of the situation to use as a news drop-in.

■ All newsroom employees are expected to disclose potential conflicts to the executive editor.

■ In the event of a potential non-newsroom conflict of interest, an editor's note will be published or a paragraph inserted in the story explaining the situation and the potential conflict. An example would be if the Goose Pimple Junction Exponent were sold to Gannett after a major bidding battle with WEHCO Media. Any story about that sale should include a paragraph or an editor's note that WEHCO was also involved in negotiations for the purchase of the Goose Pimple Junction Exponent.

■ Staff members should not write about, photograph, illustrate or make news judgments about family members, friends

or close associates. Columns or a writer's story being told in the first person would be obvious exceptions.

■ Staff members should notify a department head about friendships or relationships that could be a conflict of interest. The intent is not to limit an employee's personal life but to resolve potential conflicts.

When in doubt and whenever situations arise, consult with a department head.

In summary, we are to put ethics on the same plane as accuracy and fairness. If you have any doubts over whether an action blurs the lines of ethics, then see the executive editor.