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**GUIDELINES ON
ETHICAL JOURNALISM AND
QUALITY REPORTING**



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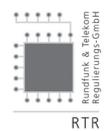


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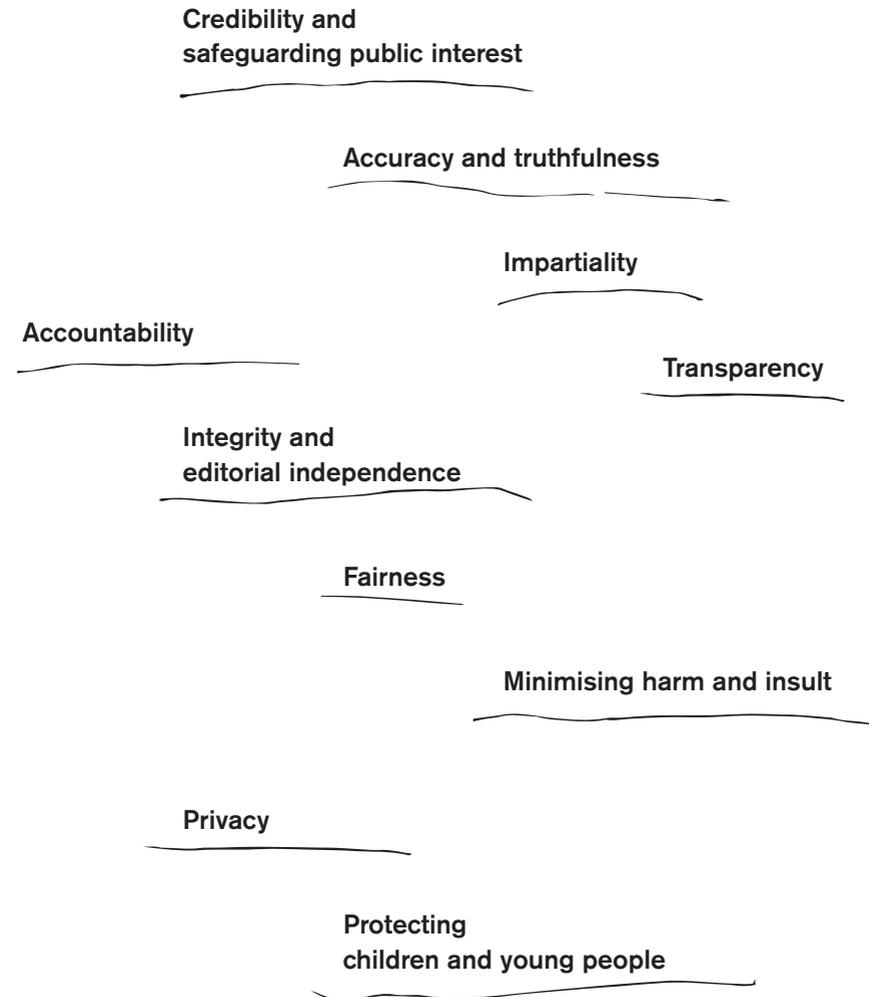
These guidelines summarize the main principles and professional standards on which journalism rests. It aims to serve as an introduction to the subject and addresses journalists regardless of whether they come from public or commercial, traditional, or community media. The guidelines are intended to help or remind journalists and media professionals of the standards and principles they should adhere to when practicing their profession that, above all, serves the public interest. Additionally it aims at citizens who use information critically and want to be able to recognize unprofessional journalistic practices in a democratic society.

[1] Kovach, B. & Rosenstiel, T. (2007) *Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, New York: Three Rivers Press.

In *Elements of Journalism*¹, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel pose the following question: whom does journalism serve, particularly in times of change brought about by the digital revolution, citizen journalism, as well as the strong domination of corporate communications that, subtly but successfully, have blurred the lines between public relations and journalism.

The media are obliged to **safeguard and promote public interest**, that is, to serve only the public interest and act as a watchdog of democracy. This obligation concerns all media irrespective of whether they are public or private, national or regional/local outlets, and regardless of their technology of operation, management style, or funding model.

For these reasons, the media and journalists should adhere to the following principles in their work:



The journalistic principles described in these guidelines are based on:

- The Code of Ethics of the Journalists of Macedonia and the goals of the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia and other self-regulatory mechanisms;
- The Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, the Law on Media, bylaws and other acts of the Agency of Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, other regulation covering the operation of the media, such as the Electoral Code, the Criminal Procedure Code, and so forth;
- The right to freedom of expression as stipulated by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights;
- International and European norms precisely defining the work of the media and journalists;
- Codes of ethics and recommendations of foreign and international media associations, and
- Work policies and ethical guidelines/codes of influential media outlets in the world: the *BBC*, the *Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Independent*, the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*, the news agencies *Associated Press*, *Reuters*, and so forth.

The contents of these guidelines are based on international regulations treating the issues of ethical and professional reporting, as well as on numerous journalistic codes and policies that are practised by the most influential and respected media outlets in the world.

“The Guidelines on Ethical Journalism and Quality Reporting” were developed within the project *Connecting young people with ex-Yugoslavian background by means of radio production*, funded by the ERASMUS+ programme of the European Union. The guidelines are based on “The Public Interest Journalism Handbook”, developed by the Institute of Communication Studies (Skopje, Macedonia) within its project *Voicing the Public Interest: Empowering the Media and the Citizens in Safeguarding Public Policies in Macedonia*.

I.
**TRUST AND SAFEGUARDING
PUBLIC INTEREST**

Trust and public interest are the most important resources of the media. They play a vital role in the democratic order and form the foundation of social cohesion. The media are the main source of public interest information. The delivery of information that helps educate citizens to understand society strengthens media credibility and reliability. The media fulfil their mission through promoting the public interest, responsibility, professionalism, and transparency in their work. The media's responsibility towards the audience/public always precedes all other interests. The media and journalism should not serve any special interests and are obligated to foster fairness, freedom, and a comprehensive approach to public matters. The media should answer to their audience and the general public, and not serve the owners, publishers, the government, or any private interests.

The media should serve the public interest with an overarching objective: to contribute to the development of the individual and the strengthening of the community. They should associate themselves with social progress—the goal being the democratic advancement of a society with respect for individual freedoms and human rights and liberties. Their responsibility is to stimulate, strengthen, and defend the freedom of expression and the citizens' right to information.

Journalists should be independent, impartial, and honest when reporting on events that are important to the public. They are obliged to strive for achieving the highest standards of accuracy and impartiality, and to avoid deliberate audience manipulation. Journalists and the media should be resistant to pressure and influence from any subject or source.

The media should be consistent in establishing the truth of the events and coherent in their interpretation and explanation. They are obliged to strive to provide an objective portrayal of events; to accommodate differing views and opinions; and to encourage a comprehensive public debate forum for all current issues and problems in society. Thus they will supply the public/audience with information and perspectives crucial to its public and private life.

The media are expected to foster debate on all social problems; to be open to all political options and allow the citizens to participate in political life and political decision-making. They should also ensure the development of innovation and creativity, as well as the clash of new ideas. It is their responsibility to contribute to a culture of dialogue and foster tolerance towards different positions on all public interest matters.

When practicing their profession, journalists should be aware of the following:

Any other engagement, apart from the one directed to the public / audience, undermines their credibility and reliability;

Serving the public interest implies an obligation to reflect the diversity of the community in the media content presented /reported;

Serving the public interest guarantees thorough and comprehensive investigation of events and circumstances, and

Striving towards professional engagement of the media when presenting information to the public/audience will enable it to make the most informed public policy decisions.

A responsible and public service-oriented media will provide accurate information to all segments of society and invite freely expressed differing opinions that represent the views of a diverse cross section of society or the community.

The key principles of the above-mentioned are:

× Promoting the diversity of the media landscape and attaining a high professional quality of the media in order to serve the public interest;

× Protecting the public/audience from unprincipled and illegal media practices, and

× Building the trust of the public/audience by being both transparent and accountable.

II. ACCURACY AND VERIFICATION

Accuracy is the most venerated of all journalistic principles and the cornerstone of professional journalism. The information delivered should correspond to reality, to be truthful and verified by at least two independent sources. But accuracy is not just adhering to facts, and journalists are not mere 'stenographers' rigorously striving to satisfy the five Ws of journalism: 'Who?', 'What?', 'When?', 'Where?' and 'Why?' (with the additional question of 'How?'). Journalists are expected to provide accurate and in-depth analyses that will enable citizens to make decisions affecting their lives.

Journalists should gather first-hand information, verify the facts, and authenticate the sources before publishing either online and/or in legacy media.

* Journalists must strive to provide precise and accurate information.

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* All news and journalistic output has to be attributed to credible sources, to be based on solid evidence, to be thoroughly corroborated and to be presented in clear and precise language. Journalists should be honest about acknowledging when they do not have the complete story. They should also avoid unfounded speculation.

* Journalists should always inform their audience or readers when they cannot corroborate accusations or disputed facts and content. They should identify sources and attribute quotes unless there are justifiable reasons for withholding names or identifying individuals.

* Journalists must not deliberately mislead the audience. They must not distort facts and present fabricated materials as true.

* Mistakes must be admitted and corrected as soon as possible, in a clear and appropriate manner.

* Speed must not be more important than truthfulness and accuracy.

III. IMPARTIALITY

Journalists must strive to be impartial at all times. This means that they refrain from showing bias toward any point of view or siding with one position over another when reporting or preparing a story for print, radio, or online.

Journalists, like all individuals in society, have a right to their own privately held convictions, views, and opinions. But they need to set them aside when performing their journalistic duties, as the public deserves fact-based reporting and information-backed analyses. Therefore, the journalists' views and opinions must not influence their practices, especially when covering contentious stories and issues.

Only by presenting a broad range of views and opinions can journalists truly serve the public. It is vitally important that they reflect the views and opinions of a broad cross section of groups and individuals in society.

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* Journalists are obliged to treat news and information with due impartiality; to ensure that their coverage and presentation is balanced and proportionate to the events, views, and opinions of the main sides of the story.

* Journalists are obliged to provide a broad range of positions and perspectives in an appropriate timeframe in TV or radio programming, or in a series of texts and articles in print or online media, so that no important position or perspective is deliberately avoided or not presented adequately.

* Journalists are obliged to treat and cover contentious subject matters in society with due impartiality.

* Within the media outlet's editorial policy, journalists and editors enjoy the editorial freedom to publish content on any issue in any part of the coverage, provided there is good reason for that, and particularly if it is conducive to safeguarding public interest. Views of the editorial board should be indicated accordingly.

IV. TRANSPARENCY

In order to maintain the audience's trust, public interest journalism has the added responsibility to provide the viewers, listeners and readers with a means to evaluate their journalistic output. Transparency about how they process and produce news and information is of key importance in this regard. Just as journalists endeavour to inform the audience with important public interest matters, the audience wishes to know how the journalists obtained their information; if they have checked their facts sufficiently before publishing them; if they have established the reliability of their sources, or if the media outlet has ulterior interests, apart from serving the public, while pursuing a certain subject matter. Transparency is particularly important when it comes to information sources. Only in exceptional circumstances, when deemed in the public interest, they can remain anonymous.

* Journalists must not conceal their identity from the public and their interlocutors, other than in exceptional cases that are in the public interest.

* Information sources must be clearly identified in stories other than in exceptional cases when it lies in the interest of the public to use anonymous sources.

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* The media and journalists are obliged to explain to the audience how they have obtained the information they publish.

V. ACCOUNTABILITY

Journalists are responsible for their work and they should always be accountable to the audience. Maintaining a transparent relationship with their readers, listeners, and viewers and reacting openly to journalistic content contributes to better and higher-quality journalism. Being accountable and responsible is particularly important when it comes to feedback about whether the journalist has fulfilled the fundamental journalistic standards according to his or her audience—reporting impartially, providing reliable information, and protecting privacy.

As in any other profession, mistakes are inevitable in journalism, but to correct them in a prompt and timely manner is vitally important. In addition, this should be a learning experience for journalists so that they do not repeat mistakes in the future. Journalists must conduct themselves in a professional manner when acknowledging their mistakes.

* Journalists are responsible and accountable to the audience. Audience trust is an important requirement regarding the media's role of acting in the public interest.

* The media and journalists serve the public interest. For that reason, the needs of the audience—the readers, listeners and viewers—are of primary importance when selecting the subject matter or stories and issues to cover.

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* The media and journalists should honestly and openly admit mistakes committed during their work. They should correct them in a timely manner and build a culture of learning from one's mistakes.

* Audience interaction is also particularly important for the participation of the public, including citizens in creating public opinion.

VI.
INTEGRITY AND
INDEPENDENCE OF EDITORIAL POLICY

The media and journalists should be free of outside political, corporate, and other influence, since they may threaten editorial independence. The audience should have certainty that the decisions of the media to cover a certain event or treat a given subject matter have not been made under pressure or influence by personal interests.

* The media and journalists, editors-in-chief, editors, and all other professionals involved in the information process should be free and independent of outside interests and the arrangements of the media with various subjects that might threaten journalistic integrity.

* Owners should not interfere with media editorial policies. They must not use the media content for their own political, economic, or personal interests. Informative content is exclusively in the service of public interest and for informing the public.

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* Integrity implies that the media are responsible to the audience/public and adhere to ethical and professional standards. Journalistic integrity is defended not only by journalists and editors, but also by photojournalists, video editors, and all other professionals involved. They all should work to the highest professional journalistic standard.

* Reputation and credibility are directly related to integrity and independence. But this does not imply limiting journalists' convictions, beliefs, or interests when they are not performing their professional duties. Nevertheless, their outside interests should not stand in conflict with journalistic integrity and media transparency.

VII. FAIRNESS

The media should be fair and principled to their sources and collaborators, as well as to the audience. Media reporting should reflect the relevant facts and the important positions. Journalists are obliged to treat individuals, institutions, events, and subject matters ethically and with due respect. The illegal or unfair treatment of individuals or organisations is impermissible.

* The media and journalists are obliged to be open, honest, sincere, and fair towards their sources and audience. The media may act differently only if such actions are in the service of public interest, for instance, when treating matters of legal or security issues, or confidential information.

* Journalists should duly notify their information sources/interlocutors of the nature and the context of their involvement. Consent needs to be clear and voluntary. The exception to this standard is when public interest outweighs the right of the interlocutor/source to give consent to participate.

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* When an individual or an organisation is being criticised in the news or in other informative content by using allegations or evidence of incompetent, poor, or illegal operation, the criticised parties have the right to reply or respond.

* No journalistic reporting or programming content is fair if:

- It does not have all the main facts;
- It contains irrelevant information at the expense of the most important facts;
- It misleads the audience, intentionally or unintentionally, and
- The journalist employs language or methods (actions) indicating his or her bias.

IIX. MINIMISING HARM AND INSULT

The media should represent the world accurately, including as many aspects of human experience and reality as possible. They are obliged to balance between the right to publish new, informative, and stirring content and the responsibility to protect the vulnerable from harm and insult. The media and journalists should be mindful of their audience, particularly in content concerning child welfare.

* In cases where the content involves material that might harm or offend part of the audience, the media should always demonstrate editorial responsibility, referring to the professional standards and codes of ethics.

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* The media should not publish or broadcast content that might seriously harm the physical, mental or moral development of children and adolescents.

* The media and journalists should provide appropriate protection for the public/audience against offensive and harmful content.

* Journalists are obliged to foster speech culture. Using harsh language may be editorially justified solely if it is a matter of public interest.

IX. PRIVACY

The right to privacy implies the citizens' rights to be left alone or to have control over unwanted publicity of their private information. Everyone has the right that his or her private and family life, home, health, and correspondence (including digital communication) is being respected. The media are obligated to respect privacy and not to violate it without good reason and public interest. Fulfilling the ethical, legal, and regulatory obligations requires assessing a balance between privacy and the media's right to release public interest information. The media must be able to demonstrate why the violation of privacy is justified.

There are several key issues to be taken into account when considering an invasion of privacy:



There must be sufficient reasons for it—the invasion must be justified with the scope of the potential harm it may cause;

There should be good reasons for the motive—the invasion must be justified in terms of public interest and the public benefit resulting from the release of the information;

The methods used must be consistent with the seriousness of the story and its public interest—to use as minimal an invasion of privacy as possible;

The relevant authorisation is required—any invasion must be authorised from above and with appropriate supervision, and

It must have reasonable prospects of success.

* The media are obliged to establish balance between public interest in the freedom of expression and the citizens' legitimate expectations of privacy.

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* For the sake of complete and accurate information on events involving human suffering and disasters, the media are obliged to establish balance between public interest and the citizens' privacy, as well as respecting their human dignity.

* The media must justify the invasion into the private life of the individual without their consent, demonstrating that it is outweighed by public interest.

* The media report on the private conduct of public figures solely when this conduct or its consequences may endanger public interest.

**X.
CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AS
SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND CONTRIBUTORS**

Children and young people are very important to the media. They contribute to the media and communicate with them in various ways: as collaborators, sources of information, actors, hosts, through interactive media and user content, through all the services. The media are obliged to provide children and young people with interesting, exciting, educational content and help them make sense of the world they live in. The media should protect the welfare and dignity of children and young people contributing to their content.

That implies protecting their right to express themselves, to state their opinions, and participate in public life, as guaranteed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

* When including children and young people in media production, it is necessary to ensure that they will not suffer unnecessary anxiety or distress. Their participation must be clearly justified editorially when required. Consent should be obtained in accordance with the position of the child/young person and the nature of their contribution to the production.

* It is necessary to ensure the physical and emotional development and dignity of the persons under the age of 18, and particularly protect children under 15 years of age during the preparation and delivery of information/programming and internet content, regardless of whether their parents, legal guardians, or other responsible adults have given permission for it.

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* It is necessary to establish balance between protecting children and young people from inappropriate content and their right to express and freedom to receive information.

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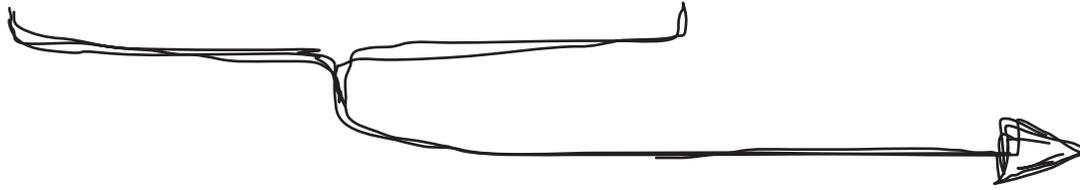
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