

## USA TODAY NETWORK

### PRINCIPLES OF ETHICAL CONDUCT FOR NEWSROOMS

Effective October 3, 2018, this document updates USA TODAY Network's Principles of Ethical Conduct for newsrooms and includes concepts and language developed by the Radio and Television Digital News Association, other Gannett documents and a group of Gannett executives and journalists. These principles are designed to guide journalists working with any news platform, including newspapers, websites, mobile devices, video, social media channels and live story events.

#### WE ARE COMMITTED TO:

##### I. Seeking and reporting the truth in a truthful way

- We will be honest in the way we gather, report and present news - with relevancy, persistence, context, thoroughness, balance, and fairness in mind.
- We will seek to gain understanding of the communities, individuals and issues we cover to provide an informed account of activities.
- We will hold factual information in editorials and other opinion pieces to the same standards of accuracy as news stories.
- We will treat information from unofficial sources, which may include social media, with skepticism and will seek to corroborate information.
- When considering news content created outside of the Network, we will factor the credibility of the source and weigh the value and accuracy of information provided.

##### II. Serving the public interest

- We will uphold First Amendment principles to serve the democratic process.
- We will be vigilant watchdogs of government and institutions that affect the public, fighting to ensure that the public's business is conducted in public.
- We will seek solutions as well as expose problems and wrongdoing in order to effect change for the good in the communities we serve.
- We will provide public forums for diverse people and views.
- We will reflect and encourage understanding of the diverse segments of our community.
- We will provide editorial and community leadership.
- We will seek to promote understanding of complex issues.
- When sharing editorials and other opinion articles, we will encourage and promote views that foster understanding, insight and civil discourse. We seek to offer viewpoints that represent various views on a particular topic.
- We will consider providing free access to some news coverage during public safety emergencies and as a public service when appropriate, such as elections.

### III. Exercising fair play

- We will treat people with respect and compassion.
- We will correct errors promptly.
- We will strive to include all sides relevant to a story. When news develops, and we can't include important perspectives immediately, we will share updates, including additional sources, when possible. We also will share attempts to reach sources who add value to the story.
- We will explain to audiences our journalistic processes to promote transparency and engagement.
- We will give particular attention to fairness in relations with people unaccustomed to dealing with the news media.
- We will use confidential sources as the sole basis for published information only as a last resort and under specific procedures that best serve the public's right to know.

### IV. Maintaining independence

- We will remain free of outside interests, investments or business relationships that may compromise the credibility of our news reporting.
- We will maintain an impartial, arm's-length relationship with anyone seeking to influence the news.
- We will not support political campaigns or causes through the display of bumper stickers, signs, pins, public/private donations, participation in demonstrations, petitions or in social media posts.
- Individual viewpoints that might cause readers to question our impartiality in news coverage should remain private. This principle does not apply to those who are paid to write and share opinion.
- We will avoid potential conflicts of interest and eliminate inappropriate influence on content.
- We will be free of improper obligations to news sources, newsmakers and advertisers.
- We will not blur the line between advertising and editorial content. We will provide appropriate disclosures, exercise transparency and avoid actual or implicit commercial endorsements by our journalists.
- When sponsorships of news are appropriate, we will not allow them to determine, change or restrict content.

### V. Acting with integrity

- We will act honorably and ethically in dealing with news sources, the public and our colleagues.
- We will obey the law.
- We will observe standards of decency.
- We will take responsibility for our decisions and consider the possible consequences of our actions.
- We will be conscientious in observing these principles.

- We will use technological tools with skill and thoughtfulness, avoiding approaches that skew facts, distort reality, or sensationalize events.
- We will not plagiarize or fabricate information.
- We will not alter photos, video or audio to misrepresent events or mislead audiences.

## PROTECTING THE PRINCIPLES

No statement of principles and procedures can envision every circumstance that may be faced in the course of covering the news. As in the United States Constitution, fundamental principles sometimes conflict. Thus, these recommended practices cannot establish standards of performance for journalists in every situation.

Rather, they are intended as a resource to help our journalists make better decisions in accordance with our aspirational principles. These principles are not intended to be a statement of our legal obligations, nor could they be enforceable under the First Amendment.

Careful judgment and common sense should be applied to make the decisions that best serve the public interest and result in the greatest good. In such instances, journalists should not act unilaterally. The best decisions are obtained after open-minded consultations with appropriate colleagues and superiors – augmented, when necessary, by the advice of dispassionate outside parties, such as experts, lawyers, ethicists, or others whose views in confidence may provide clarity in sorting out issues. The Network’s ethics advisory team ([contentfeedback@gannett.com](mailto:contentfeedback@gannett.com)) is also on hand to be a part of newsroom coverage conversations.

Here are some recommended practices to follow to protect the principles. This list is not all-inclusive. There may be additional practices – implicit in the principles or determined within individual newsrooms – that will further ensure credible and responsible journalism.

### Ensuring the Truth Principle

“Seeking and reporting the truth in a truthful way” includes, specifically:

- We will not lie or misstate our identities or intentions.
- We will not fabricate or plagiarize.
- We will accurately attribute work and thoughts of others.
- We will not alter photographs, video or audio to mislead audience members.
- We will not intentionally slant the news.
- We will correct or clarify information in a timely, thoughtful manner.
- We will be transparent when we correct or change information in the course of an ongoing news story. (See corrections and clarifications guidance below.)

## Using confidential sources in reported content

The use of confidential sources in stories should be rare.

Information obtained from confidential sources should advance coverage significantly or be critical to audience understanding of the report. (Tip: If the new information is not critical enough to appear at the top of a story, it's unlikely to meet the standard for using a confidential source.) Whenever possible, reporters should seek to confirm news on the record by using other sources and public documents. If confidential sourcing is required:

- Use only people who are in a direct position to know.
- Attempt to corroborate information from a confidential source through another source or sources with independent knowledge of the information and/or with documents.
- Inform sources that his/her name will be disclosed to at least one senior newsroom leader. When content involving confidential sourcing is planned for Network coverage, the Network chief content officer/editor-in-chief and Network editor handling the story should be notified of sourcing approval.
- Hold managers who approve sourcing and the journalist working directly with the source accountable when unnamed sources are used. When a significant story to be published relies on a source who will not be named, it is the responsibility of the approving manager to confirm the identity of the source and to review the information provided. This may require arranging for the manager to meet the source. The same principles apply to the use of confidential documents. It is not enough to know and sign off on the identity of the source of the documents. The approver must be satisfied that the documents are authentic and trustworthy and that chain of custody of the documents can be traced to their originators.
- Share the source's name verbally with the approving manager. Avoid email exchanges.
- Make clear that agreements of confidentiality are between the news organization and the sources, not just between the reporter and the sources. The news organization will honor its agreements with sources. Reporters should make every effort to clear such confidentiality agreements with a senior-level manager first. Promises of confidentiality made by reporters to sources will not be overridden by the news executive; however, newsroom managers may choose not to use the material obtained in this fashion.
- Confidential treatment should be reserved for sharing facts. Weigh the value of and motive behind information before deciding to use it with an eye on fairness and accuracy. Anonymous criticism, praise and speculation should be avoided.
- In most cases, paraphrase information provided to us confidentially -- unless a direct or partial quote more accurately describes that information for the reader.
- Paraphrasing is preferred because blind quotes can unfairly infuse feelings, opinions and biased interpretations. This is a judgment call that should be weighed by the manager approving sourcing.
- The number and standing of confidential sources should not be exaggerated.

- Journalists and their sources should have clear understanding of the nature of the confidentiality that is appropriate for the story. There may be multiple options and, where possible, they should be discussed with a manager before a promise of confidentiality is extended. Among the options:
  - The news organization will not name the source in the story;
  - The organization will not name the source unless compelled to do so by a court;
  - Other options, such as cases where a promise never to name a source is being considered, should be discussed with the Network’s chief content officer/editor-in-chief.
- All sources should be informed that the news organization will not honor confidentiality if the sources have lied or misled the news organization.
- Make sure both sides understand the stipulations of the agreement. For example:
  - Statements may be quoted directly or indirectly and will be attributed to the source. This is sometimes referred to as “on the record.”
  - The information may be used in the story but not attributed to the source. This is sometimes referred to as “not for attribution” or “for background.”
  - The information will not be used in the story unless obtained elsewhere and attributed to someone else. This is sometimes referred to as “off the record.”
- Describe an unnamed source’s role as fully as possible (without revealing that identity) to help audience members evaluate the credibility of what the source has said or provided. When appropriate, explain to audience members why an anonymous source is being used and why the source does not want to be identified. The approving manager should agree to that description in advance.
- Do not make promises you do not intend to fulfill or may not be able to fulfill.
- Do not threaten sources.
- Anonymous sourcing from wire reports or other media we trust should be used only when absolutely necessary. Confidential treatment should align with the Network’s best practices, and sourcing should be attributed to the appropriate organization.
- Wire reports and other media reports that rely upon confidential sources should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration the credibility of the media source and our own best practices. It may be appropriate to refrain from running a report, or to attempt to independently verify the information if possible. It may also be appropriate to alert our audiences that the report relies upon information we have not verified.

### Being fair

News cycles are immediate and continuous and news organizations should update information and add comments and responses as soon as they become available. They should not wait for the next scheduled update or edition. That is especially important when, because of timeliness or unavailability, a response from the subject of an accusation is not available for an initial news story or video. This means:

- We should make a good-faith effort to seek appropriate comment from an accused person (or organization) before posting or publication, where practical to do so. It may be appropriate to describe this effort briefly, high in the story regardless of whether comment was declined.
- As the continuous news cycle plays out, news organizations should continue to seek responses and comments and should include them when possible.
- Exercise special care when children are involved in a story and consider giving them greater privacy protection than adults. The same consideration may be appropriate for sexual assault or rape victims.
- Audience feedback, story chat, op-ed columns, and other forms of commentary and response should be added to the news cycle where appropriate. This include viewpoints that take coverage to task.
- Review your work to make sure you are not omitting information important to a balanced report.

### Being independent

- News staff members are encouraged to be involved in worthwhile community activities, so long as this does not compromise the credibility of news coverage.
- When unavoidable personal, business or social media interests could compromise the news organization's credibility, such potential conflicts must be disclosed to one's supervisor and, if relevant, to the audience after consulting with an editor or coach.
- There will be times when a media company partners with or accepts a sponsorship from a community organization or business. In those cases, senior business and content managers must agree on the parameters of the arrangement. That agreement may define a general subject area to be covered by the news organization in support of a marketing or advertising initiative. However, the news organization will not show favor toward a participating business or organization or include or exclude information solely for the reason of benefitting the partner. At the same time, the partner should not be excluded from positive coverage solely based on its relationship with the news organization – it should be treated as any similar organization.

### Conducting investigative reporting

Aggressive, hard-hitting reporting is honorable and often courageous in fulfilling the media's First Amendment responsibilities, and it is encouraged. Investigative reporting by its nature raises issues not ordinarily faced in routine reporting. Here are some suggested procedures to follow when undertaking investigative reporting:

- Involve more than one producer, editor or coach at the early stages of planning and shaping coverage and in the editing of the stories, videos, and other content elements.
- Question continually the premise of the stories and revise accordingly.
- Document the information in stories to the satisfaction of the senior news executive.

- Have a “fresh edit” by an editor or coach who has not seen the material as you near publication or posting. Encourage the editor to read it skeptically, then listen carefully to and heed questions raised about clarity, accuracy, fairness and relevance.
- Make certain that care, accuracy and fairness are exercised in headlines, lead-ins, videos, photographs, interactives, presentation and overall tone.
- Whenever possible, make certain that subjects accused of wrongdoing are given an opportunity to answer those charges. Share the outcome of those efforts with our audience, regardless of whether comment was declined.
- Evaluate legal and ethical issues fully, involving appropriate colleagues, superiors, lawyers or dispassionate outside parties in the editorial process. (For example, it may be helpful to have a technical story reviewed by a scientist for accuracy, or have financial descriptions assessed by an accountant, or consult an ethicist or respected outside editor on an ethical issue.)
- Be careful about trading information with sources or authorities, particularly if it could lead to an impression that you are working in concert against an individual or entity.
- Maintain a regular practice for handling any information or notes used or unpublished related to the investigative pieces. Seek advice from a coach, and the Law Department as needed, on best practices.

### Editing skeptically

In most cases editors, news directors, coaches and consumer experience directors determine what will be published or posted and what will not. Their responsibility is to question and scrutinize, even when it is uncomfortable to do so. Here are some suggested practices:

- Take special care to understand the facts and context of the story. Guard against assumptions and preconceived notions.
- Ensure time and resources for sound editing. Complex or controversial stories may require careful scrutiny by several editors or coaches.
- Consider involving an in-house skeptic on major stories – a contrarian who can play the role of devil’s advocate. Challenge conventional wisdom.
- Consider what or who may be missing from the story. Include diverse views through a diversity of sources that reflect your community.
- Consider how others – especially antagonists or skeptical readers – may view the story. What questions would they ask? What parts would they think are unfair? Will they believe it?
- Be especially careful of stories that portray individuals purely as villains or heroes.

- Beware of stories that reach conclusions based on speculation and protect against being manipulated by advocates and special interests. (Consider these questions: “How do you know? How can you be sure? Where is the evidence? Who is the source? How does he or she know? What is the supporting documentation?”)
- Don’t allow deadlines, unrealistic competitive concerns or peer pressure to force premature publication of an investigative report.

### Ensuring accuracy

Dedication to the truth means accuracy itself is an ethical issue. Each news person has the responsibility to strive for accuracy at each step of the process.

- Consider carefully information attributed to a source and be sure the person quoted is in a direct position to know.
- Be especially careful with technical terms, statistics, mathematical computations, crowd estimates and poll results. Verify this content with the source or documents where practical or make it clear who is providing the estimate.
- Consider going over all or portions of an especially complicated story with primary sources or with outside experts. However, do not surrender editorial control.
- Don’t make assumptions. Don’t guess at facts or spellings. Wikipedia is not a definitive source for fact-checking or spelling.
- Consider backing up your notes digitally when ethically and legally appropriate.
- Be wary of archived content and file photos and videos, which may contain uncorrected errors or be misleading, especially if reused in the wrong context.
- Especially in the case of digital breaking news coverage, remember that you are not first if your content is not right. Also, in cases of significant news that has been broken by others, but you have yet to confirm, consider telling your audience that you are working to confirm unverified information others are reporting. When appropriate, say what you are doing to confirm the information. But do not ignore the story. Use caution when the news involves serious allegations of wrongdoing.
- When offering content produced by others or when aggregating content from multiple sources, rely on sources you know to be most reliable and eschew less reliable sources.
- Develop checklists of troublesome or frequently used names, streets, titles, etc.
- Understand the community and subject matter. Develop expertise in areas of specialized reporting.
- Use care in writing headlines, lead-ins, promotions, and summary text. Do not stretch beyond the facts of the story.

## Correcting & clarifying errors

When an error occurs, the news organization has an ethical obligation to correct the error promptly and minimize any potential harm. However, *before* promising or making changes, we should acknowledge concerns and investigate the claims.

- When a concern about accuracy is received, a determination must first be made that an error was made. The reporter and the appropriate editor/platform manager/producer should confirm that a mistake was made, and the correction request should be reviewed by a senior news official not involved in the original coverage. If the error appears egregious and/or if an outside attorney has contacted the newspaper about the error, then the news organization should contact its attorney or the Law Department and the Network standards editor ([contentfeedback@gannett.com](mailto:contentfeedback@gannett.com)).
- In instances when an error is reported in shared content from another Network newsroom, the originating outlet should determine whether a mistake was made. Information about the mistake and the proposed correction should be shared across the Network and, if appropriate, the Network standards editor and legal counsel should be consulted.
- If the facts are right but the context of information might lead users to draw the wrong conclusion, a clarification would be more appropriate rather than a correction.
- Corrections or clarifications should be worded in a manner that does not repeat the misinformation or go into detail about how the mistake occurred. At the same time, the correction should contain enough context so that audience members understand exactly what is being corrected. *Example: A Network newsroom publishes a cover story about fatherhood and says John Doe is a divorced father. He's married. Instead of: A cover story Tuesday about fatherhood said John Doe is divorced. He is married. (Repeats the error.) Or: A cover story Tuesday about fatherhood should have said John Doe is married. (Difficult to tell what's being corrected. Did we say John Doe is widowed or divorced? Did we imply he had a child out of wedlock by not giving his marital status?) Say: A cover story Tuesday about fatherhood misstated John Doe's marital status. He is married. (Identifies what we got wrong and what we should have said instead.)*
- There are rare instances when it is appropriate to explain how an error occurred. Those would include cases in which incorrect information was provided to the news organization, or if it is necessary to protect the reputation of a reporter who was not responsible for the error.
- Corrections and clarifications should be easy to find in the paper and online. We anchor them in the paper and append to the top of stories online. Placement exceptions can be made to avoid confusing the audience.
- For online content, we label explanations “**Corrections & clarifications:** Xxxx” when setting the record straight, and we reserve such labeling as “**Editor’s note:** Xxx” for other explanations of news coverage.
- We consider how content is shared, such as video and social media, when setting the record straight.

- Errors on social media should be corrected promptly. In some cases, it may be necessary to delete a post.
- For video, correction/clarification language should be included in the video chatter and a correction slate included at the end of the footage with that explanation. The clarification needs to be in both places because sometimes the video appears without its chatter in syndication or promotion on other sites.
- Any decision to delete a video or audio feed should be approved by a senior newsroom manager.
- In cases where a video/audio has been modified or deleted but there is no story text, we still owe readers an explanation for the change. Establishing a corrections log on the website provides a newsroom window for greater transparency when addressing stand-alone items.
- In the event a mistake occurs on video/audio produced by a content partner, we should alert the partner of the error before making a final decision on whether to correct the record. Errors of common knowledge can be addressed immediately but we should alert the partner.
- For online photos, the appended correction/clarification information should follow the corrected text and should be italicized and placed in parenthesis. *Example: Randy Jackson and Ryan Seacrest are American Idol holdovers. Mariah Carey, Nicki Minaj and Keith Urban are the newcomers. (An earlier version of this photo information misidentified one of the show's new judges.)*
- If the foundation of the story is erroneous, or if the inaccuracy resulted from an egregious ethical violation, it may be best to correct the error with another story admitting the error. Any such case requires consultation with the Law Department, as does any case in which a legal vulnerability appears to exist or a lawyer's letter of complaint has been received. This should be handled working with a senior newsroom editor.
- We do not remove archived material or "unpublish" content from our digital platforms, except in rare instances when simply correcting/clarifying information may not be enough. Any decision to take down a story should come only after a broader conversation with a top news leader in the newsroom. Some situations may involve consultation with the Law Department.

### Social media guidelines for journalists

Always abide by the Principles of Ethical Conduct for Journalists. These Principles are centered on the following themes:

- Seeking and reporting the truth in a truthful way
- Serving the public interest
- Exercising fair play
- Maintaining independence
- Acting with integrity

- When covering assignments, be transparent in social media and always make clear that you work for the USA TODAY Network or your specific newsroom property.
- Consider that the content you post is public and should meet the same standards as information you publish or post on Network platforms. If you make a mistake, acknowledge your error and correct it as quickly as possible after consulting with your manager and others as appropriate. Avoid oversimplifying or sensationalizing issues; place your thoughts in context.
- Be fair.
- Remember that social network platforms are forms of public expression and should be used for strategic reasons to enhance your journalism, engage your community of followers, enlighten your news outlet's audience, and promote your news organization's brand in a positive way. Like other forms of public expression – attending political demonstrations, voicing opinions on a talk show, making political campaign contributions – they are subject to the limitations that are placed on newsroom employees through the Principles of Ethical Conduct.
- These are designed to maintain credibility with the audience.
- Properly attribute your content and link to the original source if possible. Respect others' copyrights.
- Ensure that your public conduct – on and off the job – does not undermine your credibility with the public or the Network's standing as a fair, impartial source of news.
- Although news staffers are encouraged to develop a public personality, that personality cannot cast doubt on the individual's or the organization's impartiality. We provide leeway for greater expression to those who cover opinion.
- Be sure to respect confidentiality of colleagues and sources. It may be appropriate to consider asking permission to publish or report on conversations that are meant to be private or internal.

## REINFORCING THE PRINCIPLES

### Communicating standards

Every Network journalist has a responsibility to communicate these principles to colleagues and to the public, and communication from newsroom leaders will include the following guidance:

- We ensure that sound hiring practices are followed to build a staff of ethical and responsible journalists. Such practices include making reference checks, conducting sufficient interviewing and drawing reasonable conclusions about the individual's personal standards.
- We provide prospective hires, interns, contract employees and free-lancers with a copy of these principles.
- We conduct staff training as often as needed surrounding the Principles of Ethical Conduct.
- We share these principles with new hires and seek to revisit the guidelines annually to acknowledge an understanding of our standards and to raise any questions about them.
- Raise questions or concerns with the Network standards editor and ethics advisory team by emailing [contentfeedback@gannett.com](mailto:contentfeedback@gannett.com).

## Addressing problems

There may be times when coverage or conduct falls short of the principles outlined. When that happens, newsroom leaders will promptly weigh the nature and severity of circumstances to determine next steps. Most cases can and should be settled at the local level. But in more egregious situations Network newsrooms will be guided as follows:

- When problems resulting in lapses with standards require heightened alert within the Network, local properties will work with their designated regional editor for help with a resolution. USA TODAY's executive editor will be the first line of contact for addressing national coverage issues.
- Claims of egregious errors, such as plagiarism and fabrication, or actions that may cause serious harm to individuals or groups of individuals, should be shared as soon as possible, but no later than within 24 hours with their designated regional editor (network) or USAT executive editor (national) for review and next steps. This includes content situations that prompt public backlash or unwanted media attention.
- The VP/Group News Editor or USAT executive editor (national) will work with the newsroom team editor on proposed next steps, recommendations or a resolution. This information will be shared with the VP of Community News (local), USA TODAY editor-in-chief (national), Network standards editor and Network chief content officer/editor-in-chief for final input and approval.
- Some situations may involve input from human resources, legal and communications teams.