

# THE SIGNAL CODE OF ETHICS

Based on the Model Code of Ethics for Student Journalists  
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## Overview

To seek truth and to publish it is the two-step goal of a journalist. Despite the complexities of today's college media world, truth-seeking remains paramount. To help journalists be true to this goal, newspapers, magazines and yearbooks adopt rules and guidelines, which are often called a code of ethics, for their members to follow. The code contains specific standards of conduct and moral judgments. Some points are specific and inflexible; others may be imprecise due to extenuating circumstances. Some are based on law.

Once a code is adopted, it brings desirable uniformity to some degree in the group's search for truth. The code answers questions and reminds those who operate under it those standards of honesty and performance exist. A code of ethics is not a burden; rather, a code is a useful license to practice news gathering and publishing free of much uncertainty. The code can be used individually by men and women to measure their work. The code can also be used to evaluate the integrity of the publication as a consumer product. Readers should expect nothing less than the truth; adoption of a code of ethics by those who publish helps safeguard the public trust given to journalists.

A staff should view a code of ethics as a living document. It should be revised as needs change and it should be compared to other codes for completeness. Collegiate journalists who follow a code of ethics will find the transition to commercial or non-student media easier.

## CODE OF ETHICS:

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

#### Other Employment

Employment can sometimes cause conflict with a staffers responsibilities to the publication. Staffers need to report any other employment to the editor to avoid any conflicts of interest with assignments.

EX: If a staffer works for a petrochemical company and The Signal wants to do a story on how the petrochemical industry is polluting the air, the editor would not want to assign that particular story to the staffer who works for a petrochemical company. Such an assignment would create a conflict of interest that could hinder the article and/or cause the staffer to be in an uncomfortable situation with his place of employment.

A staffer who holds a work position on campus cannot cover that office as a beat or report on any stories that are concerned with that office.

EX: If a staffer works in the computer lab part-time and The Signal wanted to do a story on how upset students are with the quality of equipment in the computer lab, such an assignment would create a conflict of interest for the staffer who works there.

### **Membership in Student Organizations**

Staffers should avoid covering a campus organization to which they belong. Staffers may provide story leads about their organizations to other staffers. Staffers should report their student organization memberships to the editor.

EX: If a staffer belongs to the Communication Club and the Communication Club is holding an event they would like covered in the newspaper, the person who is assigned to cover that event should not be the staffer who is a member of the Communication Club. To do so would make it look like the students who work for The Signal are using the newspaper as a tool for self-promotion.

To maintain the role of the press as an independent watchdog of government, a staffer who is an elected or appointed a member of student government should not be assigned any stories pertaining to the policies or addressing the governing body of UHCL.

EX: The University of Houston-Clear Lake is a shared governance university. Sometimes members of our staff may hold an office in the Student Government Association. It would be impossible for this student to cover a story involving the governing process of UHCL without arousing questions of bias.

### **Off-Campus or Freelance Media Work**

Work for off-campus mediums or freelance work cannot be submitted as articles for The Signal unless the article is of interest to UHCL students, faculty or staff AND is rewritten with a UHCL focus.

EX: An article written for the Johnson Space Center involving a program that NASA has with UHCL cannot be submitted as is because the focus would continually be drawn back to the Johnson Space Center. A staffer can, however, take the information used in that story and rewrite it with a new focus for the UHCL community.

## **Outside Activities, Including Political Involvement**

Political involvement, holding public office off-campus and service in community organizations should be considered carefully to avoid compromising personal integrity and that of The Signal. The notion of the journalist as an independent observer and fact-finder is important to preserve. A staffer involved in specific political action should not be assigned to cover that involvement.

## **Relationships and Coverage**

Staffers must declare conflicts and avoid involvement in stories dealing with members of their families. Staff members must not cover – in words, photographs or artwork – or make news judgments about family members or persons with whom they have a financial, adversarial or close personal relationship.

## **PLAGIARISM**

Plagiarism is prohibited and is illegal if the material is copyright protected. For the purposes of this code, plagiarism is defined as the word-for-word duplication of another person's writing and shall be limited to passages that contain distinctively personal thoughts, uniquely stylized phraseology or exclusive facts. A comparable prohibition applies to the use of graphics. Information obtained from a published work must be independently verified before it can be reported as a new, original story. This policy also forbids lifting verbatim paragraphs from a wire service without attribution, or pointing out that wire stories were used in compiling the story.

## **FABRICATION OF ANY KIND**

The use of composite characters or imaginary situations or characters will not be allowed in news or feature stories. A columnist may, occasionally, use such an approach in developing a piece, but it must be clear to the reader that the person or situation is fictional.

## **ELECTRONICALLY ALTERED PHOTOS**

Electronically altering the content of photos for news and general feature stories or as stand-alone news and feature photos is not allowed. Content may be altered as a special effect for a limited number of features if the caption or credit line includes that fact and if an average reader would not mistake the photo for reality. Readers expect photos and stories to be truthful.

## **PHOTO ILLUSTRATION**

Set-ups or posed scenes may be used if the average reader will not be misled or if the caption or credit line tells readers that it is a photo illustration.

## **CORRECTIONS**

An inaccuracy is never knowingly published. If any error is found, the publication is obligated to correct the error as soon as possible, regardless of the source of the error. A consistent location for the publication of corrections is recommended. Such a location could be on the editorial or op-ed page of a newspaper. It should be clearly and prominently labeled as a correction.

## **PROFANE, VULGAR WORDS & EXPLICIT SEXUAL LANGUAGE**

The primary audience of a college publication is adults. Profane and vulgar words are a part of everyday conversation, but not generally used for scholarly writing. During the interview stage of news gathering, staffers will encounter interviewees who use words viewed as vulgar and profane. The staff may publish these words if the words are important to the reader's understanding of the situation – the reality of life – or if the words help establish the character of the interviewee. The staff may decide to limit references to prevent the vulgar or profane language from overshadowing the other, more important facts of the story. Profane and vulgar words are not acceptable for opinion writing.

Though they may be vulgar or profane, individual words are not obscene. Explicit language – but not vulgar, street language – describing sexual activities and human body parts and functions should be used for accurate reporting of health stories and, in a more limited way, for sexual crime stories.

## **SEXIST LANGUAGE**

Staffers will avoid sexist labels and descriptive language and replace them with neutral terms and descriptions.

## **SEXUAL HARASSMENT**

Sexual harassment is prohibited. Sexual harassment may be:

Verbal – suggestive comments, sexual innuendo, threats, insults, jokes about sex-specific traits, sexual propositions;

Non-verbal – vulgar gestures, whistling, leering, suggestive or insulting noises; or

Physical – touching, pinching, brushing the body, coercing sexual intercourse, assault.

## **NEGATIVE STEREOTYPING**

Staffers will take care in writing to avoid applying commonly thought but usually erroneous group stereotypes to individuals who are members of a particular group. Generalizations based upon stereotypes can be misleading and inaccurate. In a broader sense, writers and photographers should avoid more subtle stereotyping in their selection of interviewees and subjects of photographs. Some examples of negative stereotypes: unmarried, black, teenage, welfare mothers; unemployed, alcohol-using Native Americans; overweight, long-haired, white, biker outlaws; limp-wristed, effeminate gays; inarticulate, dumb, blonde women.

## **USE OF RACIAL, ETHNIC & OTHER GROUP IDENTIFIERS**

Identification of a person as a member of any population group should be limited to those cases when that membership is essential for the reader's complete understanding of the story; it should be done with great care so as not to perpetuate negative group stereotyping. When identifiers are used, it is important that the correct one be used. Some examples of identifiers: Hispanic, African American, Jew, lesbian, Italian, person with AIDS, physically challenged, hearing impaired.

## **USE OF PHOTOGRAPHS OF VICTIMS OF ACCIDENTS, FIRES & NATURAL DISASTERS**

Photos have a tremendous impact on readers. The question of privacy versus the public's right to know should be considered. The line between good and bad taste and reality and sensationalism is not always easy to draw. Care should be taken to maintain the dignity of the subject as much as possible without undermining the truth of the event.

## **REPORTING NAMES AND ADDRESSES OF CRIME VICTIMS**

Victims of non-sexual crimes may be identified, but the publication has a responsibility to give some protection to the victim such as giving imprecise addresses. With the exception of major crimes, an arrested person is not named until charges are filed. Generally, the names of rape victims are not published; however there is a trend to ask rape victims to go public. This may be negotiated between the victim and the publication.

## **GRANTING AND PRESERVING CONFIDENTIALITY TO SOURCES**

A reporter should not promise confidentiality to a source without the permission of the editor. Confidentiality should only be given if there is a real danger that physical, emotional or financial harm will come to the source if his or her name were revealed. The editor should have all the facts and the source's name before the decision is made. The editor should know of any laws pertaining to confidentiality and disclosure before a decision is made. A reporter should make every attempt to get the same information from another source who agrees to be named since the goal is to attribute all information to a specific source for all stories.

## **ANONYMOUS SOURCES**

Generally, anonymous sources are not used in stories. Information that comes from an unnamed or unknown source should not be used unless it can be verified through another, known source. If two independent sources verify the information and both are unnamed, an editor may decide to publish the information with careful consideration of the need for immediacy and the news value of the information. The source may be identified generally as one associated with an agency to give some degree of credibility to the information. (See confidentiality.) The danger exists that the reader may not believe the information if sources are not given; the publication's credibility may suffer; information obtained later from a named source and verified may disprove the information given by the unnamed or unknown sources.

## **COOPERATION WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT, GOVERNMENT & COLLEGE ADMINISTRATION**

To be an effective watchdog on other agencies, a publication must remain independent. The publication should not take over any of the duties of any outside agency; cooperation or involvement in the work of these agencies should be restricted to what is required by law. Staffers should know any freedom of information, open meetings and shield laws that apply to their work. If a staffer thinks any public authority is interfering with the staffer's functions as a journalist, the incident should be reported to the editor.

## **SCRUTINY OF A PUBLIC PERSON'S LIFE**

Conflicts exist between a person's desire for privacy and the public good or the public's right to know about a public person's life. Persons who freely choose to become public celebrities or public servants should expect a greater level of scrutiny of their life than a private person – even a private person who suddenly is involved in a public situation. Staffers should make judgments based on the real news value of the situation, common sense and decency. Reporters and photographers should not badger a person who has made it clear that he or she does not want to be interviewed or photographed. One

exception is those who are involved in criminal activity or in court. Publishing intimate details of a person's life, such as their health or sexual activities, should be done with extreme care and only if the facts are important for the completeness of a story and reflect in a significant way upon that person's public life.

### **FALSE IDENTITY, STOLEN DOCUMENTS, CONCEALED RECORDING & EAVESDROPPING**

In the ordinary course of reporting, no staffers shall misrepresent themselves as anything other than representatives of the publication. In extraordinary circumstances, when an editor judges that the information cannot be obtained in any other way and the value of that information to the readers is important, the editor may authorize a misrepresentation. Staffers may not steal or knowingly receive stolen materials. Except in situations judged by an editor as extraordinary, a staffer shall not record an interview or meeting without the interviewee's permission or the obvious placement of a recording device (not hidden) at the start of the interview or meeting in which case the interviewee or newsmakers do not object and are aware of the presence of the recording device. Committing an illegal act to eavesdrop on a source is not allowed.

### **USE OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES WHILE ON ASSIGNMENT**

Even though a staffer may be able to drink legally, no drinking of alcoholic beverages is allowed while producing The Signal. No drinking in a social setting such as a dinner or reception is recommended to avoid any suspicion by a source or the public that the staffer's judgment, credibility or objectivity is impaired by alcohol. When covering an event where alcohol is served, staffers should not accept free drinks. Staffers should avoid the appearance that they are being "wined and dined" by any source or agency.

### **FREEBIES**

#### **Gifts**

Gifts should not be accepted. Any gift should be returned to the sender or sent to a charity. If the gift is of no significant value, such as a desk trinket, small food item or pen, the staff member may retain the gift.

#### **Tickets, Passes & Discounts**

If money is available, staffers assigned to cover a sporting event, lecture, play, concert, movie or other entertainment event should pay for admission. Free tickets or passes may be accepted by staff members assigned to cover an event or by those attending for legitimate news purposes. Press facilities at these events may only be used by staff members who are assigned to cover the event. Free tickets or passes may be accepted by

staff members for personal use only if tickets are available on the same complimentary basis to non-journalists.

### **Books, Records & Other Products Given for Review**

Any materials given to the publication for review become the property of the publication and not of any individual staff member.

### **FIVE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS FOR A REPORTER**

1. Why am I reporting this story?
2. Is the story fair?
3. Have I attempted to report all angles?
4. Who will the story affect?
5. Can I defend my decision to report the story?

# **MEDIA ETHICS RESOURCE PAGE**

The following organizations are useful sources for ethics questions.

## **The Ethics Advice Line**

Free ethics advice for student journalists  
(312) 409-3334

## **Society of Professional Journalists**

Nation's largest journalism organization – most newspapers base their code of ethics on the code established by the Society of Professional Journalists.

[www.spj.org](http://www.spj.org)

## **Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press (RCFP) –**

Freedom of Information Service Center

[www.rcfp.org](http://www.rcfp.org)

1-800-F-FOI-AID

## **Freedom Forum**

Journalism Think Tank

[www.freedomforum.org](http://www.freedomforum.org)

## **Poynter Institute**

Journalism Think Tank

[www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org)

## **Student Press Law Center**

Advocate for student free press rights, provides free legal help, information and advice.

[www.splc.org](http://www.splc.org)

(703) 807-1904