



# Ethics Handbook

# Table of Contents

<b>This is NPR.</b>	<b>4</b>
Our Mission	
Our Guiding Principles	
<b>Overview</b>	<b>5</b>
About the handbook	
Seeking advice and approval	
<b>Accuracy</b>	<b>9</b>
Accuracy in our reporting	
Using information from non-NPR sources	
Accuracy online	
Accuracy in visual journalism]	
<b>Fairness</b>	<b>19</b>
Fairness in presenting the news	
Fairness in reporting and interviewing	
Fairness to colleagues	
<b>Completeness</b>	<b>24</b>
Telling the full story	
Completeness in reporting	
<b>Honesty</b>	<b>27</b>
Honesty in reporting and interviewing	
Honesty in presenting information	
Honesty online	
<b>Independence</b>	<b>33</b>
Conflicts of interest	
Interacting with funders	
Owning our news agenda	
Outside work	
Paying our own way	
Working for NPR while keeping the public first	
<b>Impartiality</b>	<b>46</b>
Impartiality in our personal lives	
Impartiality as citizens and public figures	
Impartiality in our journalism	
<b>Transparency</b>	<b>54</b>
Revealing our process	
Anonymous sources	
<b>Accountability</b>	<b>57</b>
Corrections	

Interacting with the public  
Accountability online

**Respect**

60

Respect for sources and subjects of coverage  
Respect in sensitive circumstances  
Respect for our audience

**Excellence**

65

Excellence in storytelling  
Excellence in news judgment

**Putting Principles Into Practice**

72

How the handbook applies to you  
How the handbook will evolve  
Acknowledgments

# This is NPR.

And these are the standards we will uphold.

## **Our Mission**

The mission of NPR, in partnership with its member stations, is to create a more informed public, one challenged and invigorated by a deeper understanding and appreciation of events, ideas, and culture within the United States and across the globe. To this end, NPR reports, produces, acquires and distributes news, information and other content that meet the highest standards of public service in journalism and cultural expression.

## **Our Guiding Principles**

NPR is at its core a news organization. Our news content, whether on the radio, on the web, or in any other form, must attain the highest quality and strengthen our credibility. We take pride in our craft. Our journalism is as accurate, fair and complete as possible. Our journalists conduct their work with honesty and respect, and they strive to be both independent and impartial in their efforts. Our methods are transparent and we will be accountable for all we do.

We hold those who serve and influence the public to a high standard when we report about their actions. We must ask no less of ourselves. Journalism is a daily process of painting an ever truer picture of the world. Every step of this process - from reporting to editing to presenting information - may either strengthen or erode the public's trust in us. We work hard to be worthy of that trust and to protect it.

These principles are intended to guide our journalism, both as it is performed and as it is perceived, to help us earn and keep the confidence of the public. The principles exist not only to answer questions, but more importantly, to raise them. By regularly discussing and debating how these principles apply to our work, we will produce journalism worthy of NPR's name and the public we serve.

# Overview

## About the handbook

In 2003, NPR senior news managers collected years of ethical guidance into the organization's first News Code of Ethics. Over the years, that document was amended several times. Then, in 2010, a task force was formed to review the code and recommend changes to renew its relevance and impact on our work.

Composed of NPR journalists, NPR non-journalists and managers, colleagues from other news organizations, and members of the public, the task force spent months conversing with stakeholders inside and outside of the organization, including numerous meetings with NPR staff and three sessions with citizens at NPR member stations in Orlando, St. Louis and Phoenix.

Among the recommendations that emerged from the task force's review was the finding that NPR should split its News Code of Ethics into two documents - a statement of Guiding Principles, articulating the high-level values to which the organization aspires, and an accompanying handbook, with several goals of its own:

- Above all else, it should be a practical articulation of how we apply the values expressed in our Guiding Principles to the situations we face every day.
- The art of ethical decision-making is as much about the way we make decisions as it is about what we decide. So the handbook should include not just rules about what NPR journalists do and don't do, but more importantly, decision-making frameworks we can apply in different situations to guide us to a principled conclusion. It should describe processes, key questions, and real-world examples, and point journalists where to go for more help. Where policies are specified, the handbook should clearly and succinctly outline the thinking behind them.
- Lastly, it should be well-integrated into the daily life of the organization. That means it should encompass all the ethical guidance our journalists rely on, including our social media guidelines. And it should be built to evolve alongside the needs of the organization and the public it serves.

Fortunately, we had a very strong foundation to build on: the News Code of Ethics that these documents succeed. We knew early on that we wanted to use the Guiding Principles as a table of contents for the handbook, connecting every guideline to its underpinning values. So we began by cataloguing each point of guidance in the News Code by the principle it reflects most clearly.

That process had an unexpected benefit: it clarified many of the spots where the guidance in the News Code was thin. The code laid out plenty of policies on how we protect our independence, but was quieter about how we should apply key values such as fairness or respect.

You'll find that this document is thicker than the News Code, although it includes little in the way of "new policy." Much of what's reflected here derives from ethical guidance and case studies expressed in other places throughout the organization, such as our visual journalism guidelines and the years of columns from our ombudsmen. As we gathered this material, we also held many conversations with our colleagues to inform our work, and did our best to articulate some of the unwritten processes and rules of thumb that emerged from those.

Our hunt brought us to a treasure trove of ethical guidance laid out in hundreds of memos from NPR editors, producers and supervisors over the years, some overlapping, many buried in archives, but most still wonderfully relevant to the questions we face day after day. The tone of those memos – interesting, warm, witty and thoughtful, more apt to pose the right question than to impose an answer – is what we imagine as the voice of the handbook. And we hope that the natural, organic, daily process that gave rise to those memos is exactly how the handbook evolves: when we hit upon an ethical question or a challenge, we should weigh our values as we work through it, capture our thinking, and fold it in to this document.

It's not enough that we amend this handbook regularly or that we genuinely view it as a living document. The primary value of this document is that it be of use. It only works if it helps to regularly provoke and inform our thoughts, conversations and decisions.

Again and again, this process has reinforced something the task force remarked on in its review – thoughtful, principled decision-making is built into the fabric of NPR's journalism. Even where guidance hasn't already been articulated in a policy or a note to staff, our journalists are discussing these values with one another every day, and building those discussions into their work. We didn't have a written, public ethics policy until 2003. But well before that, our journalists were poring over technical documents to make sure they had described an obscure detail correctly, or were politely hounding the subjects of critical stories because true fairness means not being satisfied with "no comment."

A policy or handbook – no matter how great – is not what creates a culture this strong. If anything, it's quite the reverse. Our strongest hope is that we've helped to assemble a tool worthy of the organization it serves.

## **Seeking advice and approval**

This handbook should help you make sound decisions as you practice the craft of journalism for NPR. It should also bring your attention to ethical pitfalls you might face in that work. But its most important function might actually be prompting conversations among you and your colleagues.

This handbook tends to avoid imposing rules, leaning heavily on the judgment of our journalists. That means we place a lot of trust in your decision-making. Honor that trust by being attentive to ethical issues and speaking up whenever you have a question or concern about an ethical matter. And help to nurture a culture of ethical decision-making by routinely discussing these issues with your colleagues as you do your work.

## **WHOM TO TURN TO.**

In many instances, this handbook is intended to raise questions, not offer answers. Some of those will be questions you feel perfectly comfortable answering yourself. Others might give you pause, or require sign-off from a colleague.

Alongside this handbook, your two best sources of help in making ethical decisions are (1) your supervisor and (2) NPR's Standards and Practices Editor.

The Standards and Practices Editor is a resource - someone to help you raise the right questions, involve the appropriate stakeholders and uphold our standards as you do your work. Well-versed in the workings of our news operation, this editor is responsible for facilitating thoughtful, consistent ethical decision-making on any matter related to our journalism, whether it regards granting anonymity to a source or attending a charitable event.

The Standards and Practices Editor is also charged with cultivating an ethical culture throughout our news operation. This means he or she coordinates regular training and discussion on how we apply our principles, monitors our decision-making practices to ensure we're living up to our standards, and oversees the continual development of the ethical guidelines collected in this handbook.

This role is distinct from those of our Ombudsman and our Chief Ethics Officer. The Ombudsman serves as an independent representative of the public, examining our news practices and decisions from outside the newsroom. The Chief Ethics Officer is responsible for safeguarding the ethical functioning of our entire company - its corporate, legal and political practices, as well as the actions of employees outside the newsroom. While the Chief Ethics Officer is sometimes involved in higher-level newsroom decisions, he or she is also essentially independent of the newsroom. The role of the Standards and Practices Editor, on the other hand, is deeply woven into the functioning of our news operation, on-hand to discuss any ethical matter, no matter how big or small it may be. You can reach the Standards and Practices Editor by emailing Ethics (you can find the email address in the NPR internal address book).

When confronted with an ethical question or issue that warrants the input of another, proceed as follows:

- If you're looking for a basic gut check – someone to bounce your thoughts off of, to test whether your thinking is sound or whether others should be involved in the decision, **talk to your supervisor**. Many matters can be handled at this level. Your supervisor will help you determine whether the issue is clear-cut and merits an immediate decision, and whether others should be notified about the matter. If there's any question of whether the matter should be brought to the attention of others, supervisors will err on the side of caution and reach out to the Standards and Practices Editor.
- If you need help interpreting any of the guidance in the handbook or navigating territory that isn't covered here, if you're concerned about a matter that's out of your jurisdiction, or if the handbook notes that the decision may require the sign-off of supervisors, **talk to your supervisor and send an email to Ethics**. They'll decide whether the issue needs to be elevated to a higher level and, if so, where it should be directed.

- If for any reason you feel uncomfortable discussing a matter with your supervisor or sending a query to Ethics, **talk to a senior news manager**. That includes our Senior Vice President for News, the Managing Editors for News and Digital, the Deputy Managing Editors for News and Digital, and the Executive Editor for News Programming.

We encourage questions - answers aren't always self-evident. Consultation and collaboration make us better at what we do.

### **MIGHT MY MANAGERS BE SURPRISED?**

When making decisions, it's often valuable to ask this question: Could the effects of this decision present my editor or others in the company with an unpleasant surprise? If so, talk with your supervisor, or email Ethics.

Sure, it's never great to let the boss know about bad news. But the real value of such a question is that it can lead to the kind of conversations that produce better decisions. Two minds or more are always better than one. And "no surprises" is a way to remind yourself of that.

### **OTHER PLACES TO TURN FOR ADVICE.**

Because this is a public document, it does not include email addresses, which are for internal use. Wherever you see the instruction to email someone in this handbook, the alias given for that individual or department should be in the NPR internal email address book. If you can't access that address book for whatever reason, all email addresses listed in this handbook are posted on the company Intranet.

For advice on legal matters, email LegalAlert.

For advice specific to social media environments, email SocialMedia.

For other questions relating to digital media, email DigitalMedia.

For any questions about publicly representing NPR, email NPR Communications.

Of course, you can always send an email and/or *actually talk* to members of the legal, social media, digital media and communications teams.



# Accuracy

Our purpose is to pursue the truth. Diligent verification is critical. We take great care to ensure that statements of fact in our journalism are both correct and in context. In our reporting, we rigorously challenge both the claims we encounter and the assumptions we bring. We devote our resources and our skills to presenting the fullest version of the truth we can deliver, placing the highest value on information we have gathered and verified ourselves.

## Accuracy in our reporting

Accuracy is at the core of what we do. We do our best to ensure that everything we report faithfully depicts reality – from the tiniest detail to the big-picture context that helps put the news into perspective. Facts are incredibly slippery. Studies of press accuracy routinely find mistakes – sometimes many of them – in news media reports. This means that when journalists – even the best ones – think they’re getting it right, they’re all too often wrong. Errors are inevitable. But our best defense against them is constant vigilance. This is why we systematically and rigorously review our facts before we make our reporting public.

### **BE ABLE TO IDENTIFY THE SOURCE OF EACH FACT YOU REPORT.**

When making a general assertion of fact in a story, the reporter and editor should be able to immediately identify the source and explain why that person or organization is credible and authoritative. This is essential to the editing process and it also lets us stand by our reporting in a clear and convincing way if a story comes under question. We should never be in the position of looking for corroboration after a report has been published or broadcast.

In addition to this care in the way we source general assertions of fact, the language of such assertions must be precise. We shouldn’t put ourselves in a position where we believe the thrust of a statement is correct and supported by the facts, but the statement is open to question because we didn’t express it with enough precision.

### **GUARD AGAINST SUBJECTIVE ERRORS.**

Ensuring we have our factual details correct is only part of the accuracy equation. It’s just as important to make sure we’ve correctly interpreted those facts in our reporting. The burden is on us to ensure that the way we use the material we collect — sound, photos and words — is true to their intended meaning and context. When quoting or paraphrasing anyone — whether in a blog post, an online story or in an on-air “actuality” — consider whether the source would agree with the interpretation, keeping in mind that sources may sometimes parse their words even though we accurately capture their meaning. An actuality from

someone we interview or a speaker at an event should reflect accurately what that person was asked, was responding to or was addressing.

### **EDIT LIKE A PROSECUTOR.**

Great journalism comes in part from the collaborative efforts of reporters, editors and producers, who all play a key role in ensuring accuracy. We believe in teamwork. But good editors are also good prosecutors. They test, probe and challenge reporters, always with the goal of making NPR's stories as good (and therefore as accurate) as possible.

"A successful editor has to help the reporter see the big picture, but also needs to fret over details," says Jonathan Kern in *Sound Reporting*. And, "above all ... editors are responsible for making sure that reports are accurate and fair."

### **TAKE SPECIAL CARE WITH NEWS THAT MIGHT CAUSE GRIEF OR DAMAGE REPUTATIONS.**

Any falsehoods in our news reports can cause harm. But errors that may damage reputations or bring about grief are especially dangerous, and extra precautions should be taken to avoid them. We don't report an individual's death, for example, until it has been confirmed by authoritative sources and we're certain the family is aware. In those cases, err on the side of caution. Go slowly, and above all, get clearance from a senior manager.

This cautious, considered approach also applies to what we do on social media sites. (For more on that point, see the discussion below about accuracy online.)

#### **Case Study**

#### **COVERAGE OF THE ARIZONA SHOOTING RAMPAGE.**

No recent mistake has done more to highlight how important it is to confirm potentially grievous information with multiple, authoritative sources than NPR's erroneous report that Rep. Gabrielle Giffords (D-Ariz.) was killed during a Jan. 8, 2011, shooting rampage in Tucson. The mistakes that were made have been detailed by NPR's ombudsman and the ripple effects as the news spread via social media sites have been analyzed by NPR's social media strategist, Andy Carvin.

Here's where we went wrong:

- The initial sources were officials in the local sheriff's office. But we did not press the critical issue of whether these sources had direct knowledge of Giffords's condition or were just passing along what they had heard. We also did not determine whether the sources themselves might have been relying on a single person for their information. Even if we talk to many people about something or cite multiple other media reports, if they are all relying on the

same single source for their information that should be a red flag warning us to hold off.

- When we did get word from what we thought was a credible “second source,” it was a member of Congress (who was in Washington, not Arizona), who told an NPR correspondent that he had heard Giffords was dead. Again, we did not determine if the lawmaker had any direct knowledge.
- We did not wait to get confirmation from any of the “primary” sources that must be contacted before reporting an individual’s death: the person’s family (or a family spokesman) and officials (if they have direct knowledge and are authorized to speak) at the hospital.
- Senior NPR editors were not properly drawn into the decision-making process before the news was broadcast. Involving them in the decision-making would have slowed things down — exactly what was needed at that moment, as an offset to our natural instinct to want to be “timely” with important news.

#### Case study

#### **COVERAGE OF THE ATTACKS IN NORWAY.**

On the air [and online](#) on July 22, 2011, when an explosion in Oslo was followed by reports of a gunman attacking a youth conference on a nearby island, we were careful to report only what we could reasonably assure listeners and readers was the best, most authoritative information at the time. We reminded them many times that events were unfolding rapidly and that there was much that wasn’t known. As information changed, we explained what was new. And we provided attribution for every important detail.

By midday (ET) there were many tweets and other social media postings about a shooting spree at the island. But in our postings on NPR’s news blog the Two-Way, we focused our first update about that situation on what we could say regarding what officials knew:

*Aftenposten now writes that ‘TV 2 News channel reported that police also have received notification of a critical situation on Utoya, where Labour Youth is holding its annual summer camp.’ Journalist Ketil B. Stensrud messages that the prime minister has said on Norwegian radio ‘there is a critical situation at Utoya and several ongoing operations as we speak.’*

*Utoya is an island in a fjord about 45 minutes from Oslo.*

And we followed soon after with more information and cautionary language:

*The Associated Press just moved this alert: ‘Norway Labor Party spokesman tells AP several people shot at youth camp outside Oslo.’*

*Norway’s [Varden newspaper is quoting](#) a local ‘county secretary’ as saying he saw four people got shot there.*

Norway's [NRK news says](#) that terrified campers are texting and tweeting that they are hiding. There are also reports of some trying to swim to safety.

It's important to remember that at this point, much is not known about what's happening in Norway — for instance, whether the explosion (or explosions) in Oslo are related to the reported attack on the youth camp.

And we did not report there was a link between the incidents until there was official word:

*'It is now clear that there is a connection between the explosions in the city center' and the shootings at a youth camp on the nearby island of Utoya, police [tell Norway's NRK news](#).*

### **OUTSIDE NPR, YOU STILL REPRESENT US. BE ACCURATE, AND BE FAIR.**

NPR journalists and managers often get the opportunity to deliver speeches and appear on other news outlets' programs. Bear in mind that everything we say in those forums must meet NPR's standards for accuracy. The general standards are:

- If you wouldn't report it on NPR, don't say it in public elsewhere.
- Avoid conjecture and hyperbole. Be especially careful about the phrase "I think," which implies that you're giving an opinion as opposed to reporting, and dilutes the clarity of your words. If asked "what might happen next?" resist speculation. Use your knowledge and reporting to offer analysis and insight based on solid evidence.
- Stick to what you know. If the question is not connected to your beat, explain that you're not prepared to address the subject or cite what other NPR journalists and other trusted news organizations have reported.

### **CONSIDER USING AN ACCURACY CHECKLIST.**

Before our reporting reaches the public, we check "everything that walks or talks or acts like a fact." (Source: Margaret Low Smith.) While it may seem elementary, a simple checklist can be a powerful tool to make sure we haven't made any oversights. Here's a set of questions to ask before you call any story complete:

- **Is every name and title correctly spelled?** (And, in the case of radio, correctly pronounced according to either the subject himself or someone else with direct knowledge of how to say it?)
- **Are the quotes accurate and properly attributed?**

- **Have I reviewed my spelling and grammar?** (Special note: yes, it's important for NPR journalists to spell names, places and other key facts accurately in their radio scripts because those details end up in our Web reports.)
- **Is every number and calculation correct?** (Related tip: triple-check any references to millions, billions or trillions; confusing them is one of the most common mistakes made. Also: triple-check your references to percentages to ensure that you shouldn't be saying "percentage points" instead. If you're not sure which you should use, ask one of the reporters or editors who cover business and the economy.)
- **Are all the terms being used correctly?** For example, was the suspect really "arrested" or is he only being questioned?
- **Does every fact in the story match the information with any photos or graphics associated with it?** (Special note: again, it's important for NPR journalists who are primarily reporting for radio to check their pieces against such material.)
- **Do I need to check a source's "fact" against what others are saying?** Advocates can skew facts in their favor.
- **Is the story fair?** Read or listen one more time. Try to come to it as if you were a listener or reader, not the reporter, editor or producer.
- **Does it hang together?** Our conclusions are supported by facts. We pause before broadcast or publication to ask if we have answered all the questions that can be answered. If important questions can't be resolved, we make sure our listeners and readers know what they are.

Examples of checklists for journalists are easy to find. The Committee of Concerned Journalists [has collected several](#). And journalist Craig Silverman, who runs the [Regret the Error blog](#) (a recommended read), has a [free, downloadable and printable checklist](#).

#### **FOR MORE ACCURATE STORIES, SEEK DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES.**

We tell stronger, better-informed stories when we sample a variety of perspectives on what we're covering. The best reporting draws on the experiences of experts, influential figures *and* laypeople from across the demographic spectrum.

A story could accurately claim, for example, that unemployment in the Washington, D.C., metro area in the fall of 2011 was quite a bit lower than the national average. But that fact would probably ring false to a resident of the city proper, where the unemployment rate was considerably higher at the time. And such a story would describe a world vastly different from D.C.'s Ward 8, which had one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. Any of these vantage points could make for a technically accurate story. But drawing on all of them allows for a much more nuanced report. Means and medians can be informative, but true insight often comes from surveying experiences all along the spectrum.

## Using information from non-NPR sources

We value our own reporting and fact-gathering over that done by other news outlets. We strongly prefer to confirm and verify information ourselves before reporting. When reporting on events we did not witness personally, we seek multiple independent perspectives to get a sharper, more accurate understanding of what happened. And if we can't verify what others are reporting, but still believe the news is important and needs to be reported, we tell listeners and readers that NPR has not yet independently confirmed the news. Too often, incorrect information is passed down from one news story to another because of the failure of the first outlet to get it right. We strive to never pass on errors in this way.

### **GIVE PREFERENCE TO ORIGINAL SOURCES.**

For years, NPR journalists have been cautioned by their editors that an all-too-common pitfall of fact checking is verifying “facts” through second sources, such as other news media outlets, that do not have “direct” knowledge about what they supposedly know. The problem has only gotten more serious as the Internet has made it ever easier to find what others have reported as “fact.” That’s why we value primary sources for our facts and we check them before broadcast or publication. And we value the work of the NPR reference librarians in helping our journalists get to those original sources ([to](#) email them, look for Reference Library in the NPR internal email address book).

### **BE JUDICIOUS WHEN PASSING ALONG BREAKING NEWS.**

In breaking news situations, timeliness and accuracy can be in conflict. When news is breaking, we may need to pass along information reported by others because the public should know about it immediately. This is particularly true when safety is an issue (severe weather events or other types of emergencies, for example). In all cases, take special care in using information from wire service stories, reports by other news organizations, or articles in other publications.

If it's determined that something is so important that the public needs to know about it now, even before we've had a chance to thoroughly vet the information, be transparent: state what we're certain of, what we don't yet know and how our information was acquired. And again, if we have information that might cause significant grief (to a victim's family, for example) or might potentially put someone in harm's way, we do not report it until it's been thoroughly verified and senior news managers have given their approval.

Few in our audience will know or care which news organization was first to report a breaking news story. But if we get it wrong, we leave a lasting mark on our reputation. In rare moments, we might be late; we might not be perfect. But we will always be responsible and careful in exercising our best judgment — the judgment that has earned our organization the respect and loyalty of its audience. This is the core of our programming philosophy. (Source: NPR managing editor memo, 2003.)

### **ATTRIBUTE EVERYTHING.**

Attribute, attribute and attribute some more. No material from another source should ever be included verbatim, or substantially so, without attribution. This includes material from Associated Press reports. We

should not, for example, produce news “spots” or other pieces that closely resemble wire service stories. Our writing should be our own. There is no excuse for writing that repeats the wire stories that we use word-for-word, or nearly so.

When in doubt, err on the side of attributing — that is, make it very clear where we’ve gotten our information (or where the organization we give credit to has gotten its information). Every NPR reporter and editor should be able to immediately identify the source of any facts in our stories — and why we consider them credible. And every reader or listener should know where we got our information. “Media reports” or “sources say” is not good enough. Be specific.

Also, in cases where stories are developing and the news may be changing from moment to moment, state clearly what NPR has and has not been able to confirm on its own and what key questions remain unanswered. (Source: Bruce Drake.)

#### **ONE EXCEPTION: WIRE TRANSCRIPTS DON’T NECESSARILY NEED ATTRIBUTION.**

There is one type of material we routinely get from our wire services (The Associated Press and Reuters) that does not necessarily need to be attributed to the wire service. That is where a wire story is about a public event — such as a press conference, a speech by a public official in a public setting, an official statement of a government agency, a congressional hearing, and the like. In those cases, we reasonably expect that the wire services are reliable conveyors of those quotes in the same way we regard the transcript services we use for these events. But we must use caution. Whenever possible, check the wire service’s work against any audio or video recordings or other wire-service renderings of the events. NPR.org readers will notice if the transcription of a quote does not match the audio — even by a little. And if there is any reason to believe that a wire service report has inaccurately quoted someone or taken the speakers’ words out of context, we must check the record before using that material.

## **Accuracy online**

News moves fast on the Internet, and we know that speed and accuracy are fierce rivals, so keep your guard up. Ask questions, report and engage as you would in any public setting. But remember that everything you say or do in a social media environment is effectively a public statement from an NPR journalist, so don’t pass along inaccurate information.

#### **DON’T JUST SPREAD INFORMATION. BE CAREFUL AND SKEPTICAL.**

When determining whether to pass along information being reported on social media sites by other news outlets or individuals, be thoughtful. When we point to what others are saying, in the eyes of many we are effectively reporting that information ourselves. This is true whether the platform is an official NPR social media webpage, a personal blog or a Twitter page that is written by an NPR journalist.

But we also know that reporting about what’s being posted on social media can give our listeners and readers valuable insights into the day’s news.

One key is to be transparent about what we're doing. We tell readers what has and hasn't been confirmed. We challenge those putting information out on social media to provide evidence. We raise doubts and ask questions when we have concerns; sometimes "knocking down" rumors circulating on the Web is of enormous value to our readers. And we always ask an important question: am I about to spread a thinly-sourced rumor or am I passing on valuable and credible (even if unverified) information in a transparent manner with appropriate caveats?

Above all, proceed with caution, especially when news is breaking and accounts vary widely about what is happening. Reach out to other sources for confirmation. And the general standard is simple: Tweet and retweet as if what you're saying or passing along is information that you would put on the air or in a "traditional" NPR.org news story. If it needs context, attribution, clarification or "knocking down," provide it.

#### **WHEN IN DOUBT, CONSULT THE SOCIAL MEDIA TEAM.**

Of course, it's not always obvious how to apply journalistic principles to the social media arena. One resource always available to NPR journalists is our "social media team." Its members have expertise in collecting information from a variety of sources, in establishing to the best of their ability the credibility of those voices and the information they are posting, and in analyzing the material they use. Always make clear to listeners and readers what has been obtained from our original reporting and what we've found posted in social media outlets. And to the greatest practical extent, spell out how the information was checked and why we consider the sources credible. We may also invite our audience to assist in our efforts to monitor and verify what's being reported on social media. Such crowdsourcing does not determine what NPR journalists report, but it does add to our knowledge. The team can be reached via email (look for SocialMedia in the NPR internal email address book).

#### **FOLLOW UP OFFLINE WHEN APPROPRIATE.**

It's often easier to falsify one's identity online than it is in the offline world. And tonal or contextual nuances can be lost in online exchanges. So when appropriate, clarify and confirm information collected online through phone and in-person interviews. For example, when a social media posting is itself news, try to contact the source to confirm the origin of the information and attain a better understanding of its meaning. We must try to be as sophisticated in our use of social media as our audience and users are. The social media team is a key asset in this effort.

### **Accuracy in visual journalism**

The images and graphics we use to help tell our stories assist us in our pursuit of the truth. Some guidelines are simple: Captions and labels must accurately describe the events in the images they accompany. The same is true of the information we present online in graphics. Some things are more subjective and require more judgement: Be fair to the people in photos and honest with our viewers. Flattering photos can be as deceiving as unflattering images. Use images to convey information and tell stories, not to make the subjects look better or worse than the facts warrant. Likewise, our graphics present information in ways that educate and illuminate. We do not skew data to mislead viewers about an issue or event.



## **❓ TAKE CARE IN USING IMAGES THAT HAVE BEEN POSTED ONLINE.**

Increasingly, photos and video are being posted online by individuals. In considering whether to use those materials, do your best to verify their accuracy and, when in doubt, do not publish them.

Images can be manipulated. Old video can be reposted and made to appear as if it's new. Photos or video taken in one part of the world can be repackaged and portrayed as being from somewhere else. Again, when in doubt, leave them out.

As with all information, bring a healthy skepticism to images you encounter, starting from the assumption that all such images or video are not authentic. Then, with guidance from NPR's multimedia and social media teams (and if legal issues are involved, NPR's legal team as well), work through a series of questions, including:

- **When was it posted?**
- **Do the images or video match what has been distributed by professionals (wire services, news networks, etc.)?**
- **Is it original work or copies of what others have done?**
- **Does this person have the legal right to distribute the work and has he made the materials available for others to use?**

More resources: The National Press Photographers Association's code of ethics [is posted online](#).

## **BE VIGILANT ABOUT PRESENTING DATA ACCURATELY.**

It's easy to represent data inaccurately or misleadingly, especially in charts and infographics. Double-check your numbers and the way you portray them to make sure you're imparting the proper information.

Accurately presenting data includes guarding against false precision. Politicians may claim, for instance, that a budget plan will reduce deficits by \$1.512 trillion over 10 years. Given the many variables and uncertainties involved in such forecasts, carrying the number out that many decimal places could give readers a false sense of certainty — precisely what the politicians would like, but not necessarily what is most “true.” In such cases, rounding may be a better approach (to, for example, “\$1.5 trillion”).

When reading raw numbers, pay particular attention to the effects of different interpretations. Absolute numbers and percentages can paint very different pictures. It is true, for example, to say that the U.S. is the world's largest contributor of foreign aid. It is also true to say that of the world's major donor countries, the U.S. often contributes among the least of its G.D.P. towards foreign aid. When citing such statistics, be sure they are making the appropriate points, and that you're offering the necessary context.

Give careful thought to the way data are broken out when showing rates of change. Small differences can look much larger than they should — and large differences can look much smaller than they should — if a

graphic is not appropriately scaled. Consult the multimedia team (look for DigitalMedia in the NPR internal email address book) if you have any questions on such matters. (Source: Robert Benincasa.)

# Fairness

To tell the truest story possible, it is essential that we treat those we interview and report on with scrupulous fairness, guided by a spirit of professionalism. We make every effort to gather responses from those who are the subjects of criticism, unfavorable allegations or other negative assertions in our stories. What we broadcast and put online is edited for time and clarity. Whenever we quote, edit or otherwise interpret what people tell us, we aim to be faithful to their meaning, so our stories ring true to those we interview. In all our stories, especially matters of controversy, we strive to consider the strongest arguments we can find on all sides, seeking to deliver both nuance and clarity. Our goal is not to please those whom we report on or to produce stories that create the appearance of balance, but to seek the truth.

## **Fairness in presenting the news**

News outlets are “driven by deadlines, and under time pressure, you are sure to make mistakes — about names, affiliations, places, and so on. These errors are regrettable, and you should always correct them. ... But they are not nearly as serious as failing to be fair and unbiased. That may not only discourage people from listening; it can undermine your station’s or network’s reputation — one of its greatest assets. Even occasional lapses have serious consequences. The price of good journalism is eternal vigilance.” (Source: Jonathan Kern in *Sound Reporting*.)

We place a high value on earning the respect and trust of all sides when reporting on complex or controversial subjects. That means we stick to facts and to language that is clear, compelling and neutral. We avoid loaded words preferred by a particular side in a debate. We write and speak in ways that will illuminate issues, not inflame them.

At all times, we report for our readers and listeners, not our sources. So our primary consideration when presenting the news is that we are fair to the truth. If our sources try to mislead us or put a false spin on the information they give us, we tell our audience. If the balance of evidence in a matter of controversy weighs heavily on one side, we acknowledge it in our reports. We strive to give our audience confidence that all sides have been considered and represented fairly.

## **OUR SOURCES SHOULDN'T BE SURPRISED BY HOW THEY'RE REPRESENTED.**

No one we interview should be surprised by what they hear or read themselves saying. The conversation and quotes should “ring true” to them. That’s why NPR hosts, producers, bookers and correspondents make sure that the people we speak with know that the discussions will be edited — but that we will be true to the meaning of their words.

“You don’t want guests to be shocked — or feel they were misled — when they hear themselves on the air and discover that most of what they said has been cut out,” Jonathan Kern writes in *Sound Reporting*.

All Things Considered host Robert Siegel says that when he’s doing a “two-way” (NPR’s term of art for an interview) for broadcast later, “I inform people that this is not live, that it will be edited and that we will talk longer than what will be broadcast on the air.” He also makes sure the guest knows about how long the edited conversation will end up being. “And I say that if you make a factual error, or I do, tell us and we will ask the question again.”

Telling someone that we will be editing an interview does not, obviously, give us the right to do just anything. We “exercise good judgment ... [and] consider the editorial ramifications of the editing process,” Kern says.

In *Sound Reporting*, Kern warns that when cutting an audio interview in particular, “you may be tempted to go too far — collapsing two answers into one, rearranging the order of questions, and so on. When you make such extensive changes, the result may not reflect what actually happened in the studio.”

So we practice “ethical editing,” Jonathan adds. “Be careful that you don’t change the meaning of what someone said when you trim an answer or question,” he writes. And recognize, he says, that “you can ... cross onto shaky editorial ground if you keep all the sentences [from an interview] intact, but change their order.” The speaker’s inflections might be altered — meaning that while the words might be the same, the way they’re understood could be changed.

If you have any doubt about what a person you interviewed meant, speak with them before broadcast or publication to prevent any misunderstandings.

### **❓ “WHO IS SPEAKING?”**

In a 1999 message to the staff, Jonathan Kern discussed the use of “labels” to describe groups and organizations — and how they can help listeners or readers put what they’re hearing in the proper context and judge whether they’re being given a fair story. NPR seeks to describe groups accurately. If the terms “liberal” or “conservative” are oversimplifications, we take the extra time and space to add a longer phrase or sentence that more accurately describes the organization.

As Jonathan wrote, our goal is to answer for listeners and readers the question “who is speaking?” And not just by giving a name and a title, but by adding the context that describes where that person is coming from.

### **DON'T LET SOURCES OFFER ANONYMOUS OPINIONS OF OTHERS.**

Unidentified sources should rarely be heard at all and should never be heard attacking or praising others in our reports (with the possible rare exceptions of whistleblowers and individuals making allegations of sexual assault; see the longer discussion of anonymous sources in the section on transparency). While we recognize that some valuable information can only be obtained off the record, it is unfair to air a source's opinion on a subject of coverage when the source's identity and motives are shielded from scrutiny. And of course, we do not include anonymous attacks posted on the Web in our reports.

### **PRESENT FACTS, NOT INDICTMENTS.**

The "court of public opinion" is an expression, not a legal forum. When a person or company has been charged with wrongdoing by official sources, we must carefully avoid presenting facts in a manner that presumes guilt. When covering legal cases, always tell our listeners and readers if the defendant has entered a plea. Be scrupulous about accurately using words such as "arrested," "charged," "indicted" and other legal terms.

## **Fairness in reporting and interviewing**

If we're perceived as being unfair we not only risk losing the trust of our audience, we also put our reporting at risk. All individuals we report on should be able to trust that we'll be fair not just in how we present their views, but in how we seek those views. This means we give those whom we cover the opportunity to respond to critical allegations in our reports, or to explain themselves when we suspect they've given us inaccurate information.

When sources — even those involved in some of the most controversial issues of the day — trust that we're even-handed, our work benefits.

### **GIVE SOURCES TIME TO RESPOND.**

If our audience wonders what someone we report about had to say in his or her defense, and we haven't provided that information or explained our efforts to get it, we have failed.

When we seek such responses, we give the subjects a reasonable amount of time to get back to us and multiple ways to do so (phone numbers, e-mail addresses, etc.). What we consider "a reasonable amount of time" will vary depending on the situation, determined after a thorough discussion involving the reporter and appropriate editors — up to senior news managers in high-profile or sensitive matters.

When news is breaking, make sure the people we're attempting to reach know about our deadlines — for the next newscast and the next program, for example.

If, despite our best efforts, we cannot get a response but determine that we need to go ahead with the story, cull past reports and statements to pull out any previous comments made by the subject or organization that may help explain their positions. Look for proxies who may be able to defend their side. And tell our listeners and readers about our attempts to contact the subjects.

### Case Study

#### **NOT GETTING A RESPONSE VS. GETTING A RESPONSE.**

In 2005, NPR aired a story about the new editor of the *Paris Review*. Former staffers of the magazine — some of whom had been let go — were heard saying that the new leader was “betraying the vision” of the *Review*’s founder, George Plimpton. What was the editor’s response to that charge? He didn’t get the chance to say. Our interview with him was done before the critics were contacted, and the editor wasn’t contacted again.

NPR subsequently apologized on the air for not giving the editor the chance to answer his critics. As Bill Marimow, then-NPR vice president for news, said: “If the subject of the story doesn’t know what you’re going to report, how can we be fair to them?”

The NPR apology was also attached to the [online version of the report](#).

Contrast that with an NPR report on the drug company Merck and its painkiller Vioxx. Reporter [Snigdha Prakash was investigating allegations](#) that the company was trying to silence people who raised safety concerns about the drug. Before a key interview with company representatives, she “laid all my cards face up,” Snigdha says by giving them a chance to see all the documents she would be quoting from. Besides being the fair thing to do, it also meant that the company spokesmen were well-prepared to respond to specific questions about specific issues. (Source: Jonathan Kern, *Sound Reporting*.)

#### **OUR WORD IS BINDING.**

As an ethical matter, we would not want to reveal the identity of an anonymous source unless that person has consented to the disclosure. That’s why we take the granting of anonymity seriously.

Keep in mind that the legal protection provided to journalists to keep source identities, outtakes, or other confidential information secret is not 100% secure. Courts can compel journalists to testify or reveal information even when confidentiality has been promised, and refusal to reveal the information can result in jail time or fines. Judith Miller of the *New York Times*, for example, spent three months in jail for refusing to identify the source of the leak that Valerie Plame worked for the CIA.

To make matters worse, if we have promised confidentiality to a source but disclose the source’s identity, we could be liable for breach of contract. In *Cohen v. Cowles Media*, the Supreme Court held that the First Amendment does not protect the press from breach of contract lawsuits when a reporter breaches a promise of confidentiality.

It is therefore possible that if a journalist makes a promise of confidentiality but is later compelled to testify, s/he may either be jailed or ordered to pay money damages. Neither is a good situation. So consult with your supervisor and our legal team before you make a promise of confidentiality. Discuss whether the promise is necessary, what the exact scope of confidentiality will be, under what conditions the source might be willing to release you from the promise, and what the potential risks to you or NPR might be. We want to be sure we can keep whatever promises we make.

### **HELP OUR SOURCES UNDERSTAND OUR WORK.**

Make sure that a guest or interview subject knows when an interview has begun and when it has ended. There should be no question about what is or isn't for broadcast, and what is on the record or not.

The process starts “with the bookers and the producers,” adds Scott Simon. They are charged with finding the right guests, doing some pre-interviews and determining both that the guest is conversant with the subject and is fully informed about what will be happening.

### **Fairness to colleagues**

Our colleagues in the journalism industry and at NPR are also stakeholders in our work. It's easy to forget that our actions reflect not just on ourselves, but on our profession and on others in our company. Remember it, and be fair to those you work alongside.

### **ATTRIBUTE GENEROUSLY.**

Always be fair to your colleagues in the news media when drawing from their reports. Just as we insist that NPR be given credit for its work, we are generous in giving credit to others for their scoops and enterprise work.

When excerpting or quoting from other organizations' work, we strive to call attention to it, not draw attention from it. Do not quote or paraphrase another organization's material so much that you effectively make reading, watching or listening to their reports unnecessary. In its most egregious incarnations, excessive quotation is effectively plagiarism, which we take no part in. (For a longer discussion of plagiarism, see “Transparency.”)

### **RESPECT NPR'S COPYRIGHT.**

NPR owns the material that we collect and produce in the course of our work, whether it's for use on-air or online. This material may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of NPR. Permission can be sought through the Rights and Reuse Office (look for Permissions in the NPR internal email address book) and requests should be forwarded accordingly.

### **WOULD WE CONSIDER IT FAIR USE OF OUR WORK?**

While there is no hard-and-fast rule on how much material we can fairly excerpt or quote from another organization's work, we are guided by how we would feel if our work was being cited by others. We would welcome references to an important NPR story, or the use by others of a few key quotes from our report. But we'd want them to refrain from quoting so much that it feels like most or all of our story has been repeated elsewhere. And we hold ourselves to that same standard when referencing the work of others.

# Completeness

We do our best to report thoroughly and tell stories comprehensively. We won't always have enough time or space in one story to say everything we would like or quote everyone we would wish to include. But errors of omission and partial truths can inflict great damage on our credibility, and stories delivered without the context to fully understand them are incomplete. Our journalism includes diverse voices that reflect our society and divergent views that contribute to informed debate. When we find that we can't deliver all the answers to important questions, we explain what we don't yet know and work to fill any gaps in our reporting.

## Telling the full story

There's always more news than we can report on any platform. So we aim to produce well-rounded news coverage that reflects the most important information the public needs to know, and gives our audience a varied sense of what's happening in our society and around the world.

### **OUR COVERAGE SHOULD REFLECT THE TRUE COMPLEXITY OF THE WORLD WE LIVE IN.**

To present a complete picture of the world, NPR needs to cover a broad range of stories that will interest all sorts of people. So while it's natural to notice news that relates to events or issues you're personally interested in, it's also crucial to ask yourself what other people – people who would disagree with you, who live in other parts of the country, who have had vastly different life experiences from yours – would consider news. This is especially critical if you and your colleagues share similar backgrounds and points of view; a lack of diversity among employees will lead to less varied story lineups. For our coverage to be truly diverse, it needs to reflect the views of many different groups. We talk to people from different political, socioeconomic and racial groups, and from different parts of the country and world. And factor the prominence we give certain stories into your thinking; regularly ask yourself which themes we might be overplaying and which we might be overlooking.

For example, in a city where traffic and pollution are big problems, reporters, editors and producers who daily drive in that traffic may want to pursue a story about whether a higher national gas tax would encourage people to buy smaller cars. But an equally valid option might be to look at whether a higher national gas tax would unfairly punish drivers in rural areas who have to drive a long distance for work and to go shopping for food, or those who need pickup trucks to do their daily work.

So you not only need to look at all the different angles of a story, but at all the different possible stories that help to fill in the picture of what's taking place across the country or around the world.



### **BE THOUGHTFUL IN ADDING INFORMATION ONLINE.**

Our digital destinations can be a terrific resource for adding background material and additional information that we think will be valuable for our users. But the Web isn't a dumping ground for the material that got cut. When choosing what should accompany our stories online, be thoughtful. Include material that adds to a fuller understanding rather than crowding out the important information we mean to impart.

### **TIMELINESS IS A DIMENSION OF COMPLETENESS.**

Valuing completeness means that we have a responsibility to report on important matters in a timely fashion. Our audience should be able to expect that our coverage include the best information we can deliver about the most important stories unfolding at any particular time. When news is breaking, we should be on top of it.

But our obligation to be timely doesn't lessen our need to be accurate and fair. We don't, for example, report rumors. When an unverified story spreads far enough that the rumor is itself news, we should use it as a trigger for reporting. And in breaking news situations, we have a heightened responsibility to tell our audience exactly what we know and how we know it, as well as to emphasize what's still unknown or unverified. Judicious transparency can help to mitigate some of the challenges posed by our need to be timely.

## **Completeness in reporting**

When we say our reporting is complete, it means we understand the bigger picture of a story – which facts are most important and how they relate to one another. It's unrealistic to expect that every story should represent every perspective on an issue. But in our reporting, we must do our best to be *aware* of all perspectives, the facts supporting or opposing each, and the different groups of stakeholders affected by the issue. Only then can we determine what's best to include in the time and space we have.

Hearing from a variety of people makes our journalism stronger and more complete. In our reporting, we seek various perspectives on an issue, as well as the evidence supporting or countering each one. We try to understand minority viewpoints as well as those of recognized authorities; we don't ignore perspectives merely because they are less popular.

Those individuals whose roles give them an outsized influence in how events play out will necessarily receive more attention in our news coverage. But it's important for our audience to hear from a variety of stakeholders on any issue, including those who are often marginalized.

### **BE ABLE TO HOLD YOUR OWN WITH SOURCES.**

As journalists, we strive to master vast amounts of information. We often seek the expertise of specialists who might have a greater grasp of facts within their specialty. Our challenge is not to be dependent on what any particular source tells us, but to have enough mastery of our subject that we can accurately situate each source's knowledge and perspective within a broader context. This means we strive to know enough about a subject that we can tell when a source is advocating a disputed position, advancing a vested interest or making a faulty claim.

Daily reporting might require a different threshold of knowledge than long-term investigative reporting, but the general principle holds true in that context as well: we strive to know enough to hold our own with those we talk to.

# Honesty

Journalists who conduct themselves honestly prove themselves worthy of trust. In the course of our work, we are genuine and candid. We attribute information we receive from others, making perfectly clear to our audience what information comes from which source. We avoid hyperbole and sensational conjecture. We may sometimes construct hypotheticals to help explain issues and events, but we reveal any fabrication, and do not otherwise mix fiction with our news reporting. We edit and present information honestly, without deception, and we identify ourselves as NPR journalists when we report. Only in the rarest of instances - such as when public safety is at issue, or when lives are at stake - might we disguise our identity or intent when reporting. Before we take such a step, we engage in rigorous deliberation and consider all alternatives. Then, when we tell the story, we fully disclose what we did and why.

## Honesty in reporting and interviewing

Journalism should be done in plain sight, and our standards are clear. When we are working, we identify ourselves as NPR journalists to those we interview and interact with. We do not conceal our identities, pose as someone or something we are not, use hidden microphones or cameras to collect information, or record phone calls without the permission of all parties on the line, except in the very rarest of circumstances, outlined below.

Do we need to announce ourselves every time we're in a line at the supermarket and overhear what people are saying about the news of the day? Of course not. But if we want to quote what one of those people said, we need to introduce ourselves as NPR journalists and assume our "working journalist" role.

Do we need to wear our IDs around our necks at all times? No. We are allowed to be "off-duty."

### IS DECEPTION EVER WARRANTED?

As the expression says, "rules are meant to be broken." But only highly unusual and extremely important situations would compel us to be less than open. Our foreign correspondents are most likely to confront such issues.

There could be a situation — perhaps in a war zone — where an NPR journalist feels endangered and decides that in order to get to safety s/he would be better off not letting others know s/he is a journalist. And that experience might turn into a first-person account of what the flight to safety was

like. But we would not use it as an excuse to report information that otherwise violates our standards on openness.

If a repressive regime is arresting reporters and telling citizens not to speak with journalists, the only way to have conversations with people might be to keep our identities under wraps. We do not put anyone in danger, however, with our reporting on such conversations.

And if a repressive government is not allowing reporters inside its borders, we might not declare on our visa applications that we're journalists. Such decisions need to be discussed in advance. Senior news management must be included in the conversations.

Other situations in foreign settings might require some deviation from our guidelines on openness. We trust our correspondents to make good decisions, to consult with their editors and to be transparent with listeners and readers about their work. We also talk about foreseeable problems — such as corrupt border guards who demand “tips” — before we venture out and work through how we will respond.

Domestically, there could conceivably be a story that's so important we might consider the use of a hidden microphone because we exhausted all other ways to get the information. But only the rarest of circumstances might merit that decision. Some of the questions we would ask include:

- Is the story of profound importance?
- Are lives at stake?
- Can the information be obtained any other way?
- Would the story irrevocably suffer without the information?

We would only proceed with the approval of top NPR editors and after consultation with NPR's legal department. The subjects of any criticism stemming from the material would be given a chance to respond. And when reporting on what we discover, we would fully disclose our methods to readers and listeners.

If we ever do consider taking the highly unusual step of recording an interview without the knowledge of one or more party, we follow the applicable state and/or local laws about the taping of conversations. A resource our legal team uses to determine which laws apply is [a chart](#) called “A Practical Guide to Taping Phone Calls and In-Person Conversations in the 50 States and D.C.,” prepared by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. Again, our legal team should be consulted on any decision to act on this information.

But rather than focusing on theoretical exceptions, the point to remember is this: We do not deceive and we do our work in the open.

## Honesty in presenting information

### **OUR AUDIENCE SHOULD ALWAYS KNOW WHICH INFORMATION COMES FROM WHAT SOURCE.**

Plagiarism – taking someone else’s work and intentionally presenting it as if it is your own – is theft. At NPR it’s a grave offense. But it’s not enough that we don’t *intend* to deceive our audience. Our standard is to make clear to our audience where the information we bring them comes from.

That means no material from another source should ever be included verbatim, or substantially so, without attribution. This includes material from Associated Press reports. We do not, for example, produce news “spots” or other pieces that closely resemble wire service stories. NPR’s standard is that our writing should be our own. There is no excuse for writing that repeats the wire stories that we use word-for-word, or nearly so.

It also means that whenever we present someone’s words verbatim in text, we encase them within quotes or, in an audio report, make it clear that we are using the source’s wording. If we paraphrase for space or clarity, we transparently credit the source of the ideas. And we don’t lightly edit quotes just to avoid putting them in quotes; we use brackets, ellipses and other signals to make clear we’ve changed what someone said.

### **WE AVOID FABRICATION IN OUR NEWS REPORTS.**

“Public radio reporters and producers,” *Sound Reporting* advises, “do not ‘manufacture’ scenes for news programs. If you arrive at an office 15 minutes after the employees finish holding a prayer vigil for their kidnapped boss, you cannot ask them to reconvene so you can record a simulation of the event. By the same token, you shouldn’t ask people to pretend they are answering the phone, or typing a letter, or fixing breakfast, so that you can get sound of those activities. You should never use sound effects that could be mistaken for actualities or for ambiance that has been recorded on site.”

#### **Case Study**

#### **SOUND ADVICE: THE ARCHIVAL AUDIO THAT WASN’T.**

When an independent producer submitted a piece to NPR about an old shipwreck, it included what sounded like archival audio of a marine forecast from the 1940s.

But, as Jonathan Kern wrote in *Sound Reporting*, “when asked how he happened to have a recording of a radio broadcast for the very day of the shipwreck, the producer confessed he had written it himself and put it together in his own studio.” The piece was remixed to remove that clip and other re-creations.

### Case Study

#### **USING HYPOTHETICALS TO EXPLAIN COMPLEX STORIES.**

When Planet Money did [a series of reports](#) in 2010 about so-called toxic assets, the Planet Money team decided to purchase one of these assets for themselves as part of their coverage of the issue. The show held an online contest for fans to nominate and vote for a name for the asset; the crowd chose “Toxie.” The Planet Money team animated Toxie and used her to illustrate what they were discovering.

It was clear at all times what was going on. As Lynn Neary explained in her introduction to one report:

“We told you a couple of months ago about how our Planet Money team had made a rather risky investment. They pooled \$1,000 of their own money and bought a toxic asset, one of those complicated bonds filled with home mortgages that almost brought the global economy to a halt.

“Well, we have some bad news to report today. The bond, which listeners have named Toxie, is not doing well at all.”

The NPR “sciencey blog,” Krulwich Wonders, also frequently animates its reports — and uses some imaginative scenes and dialogue — to make complicated issues more easy to understand. ([View an example online.](#))

A critical point worth repeating: Planet Money and Krulwich Wonders were obvious when they used their imaginations in those ways. We do not mix such scenes with “straight” news reports.

#### **OUR VISUAL JOURNALISM MUST HONESTLY DEPICT REALITY.**

When reporting on news events, the photographs we take and use depict them truthfully, honestly and without bias. They are only enhanced for technical clarity — to correct color or improve contrast, for example. We are careful in how we crop them to ensure that the scene is in proper context. We let events happen — we do not stage scenes to make them fit a story line. If we have to rely on “file” art from the past, we clearly state so in the caption and include the date. And when considering photos provided by other organizations (most often, The Associated Press), we view them with a critical eye to gauge whether they meet our standards.

When packages call for studio shots (of actors, for example; or prepared foods) it will be obvious to the viewer and if necessary it will be made perfectly clear in the accompanying caption information.

Likewise, when we choose for artistic or other reasons to create fictional images that include photos it will be clear to the viewer (and explained in the caption information) that what they’re seeing is an illustration, not an actual event.

Photographs we take and choose to use must individually or collectively show the events they depict truthfully, honestly and without bias. This requirement applies whether they are taken by NPR journalists or come from other sources (such as freelancers or photo agencies).

We take great care when we translate data into charts and “infographics.” For example, while always striving to be accurate, we also guard against false precision. And we carefully consider the scales applied to the information we use, to guard against giving data either too much or too little significance. (For more detailed guidance, consult the discussion of accuracy.)

### **DON'T CREATE PSEUDONYMS FOR SOURCES WHOSE NAMES WE WITHHOLD.**

When we decide to withhold a source’s name from a story, we don’t invent a pseudonym for that source. Again, our job is to present factual - not fabricated - information. Instead, we use pronouns and descriptions to make clear who is speaking or whom we’re referring to. (Or we may refer to him or her without using a last name, if the source is comfortable with that degree of anonymity, and the situation meets our standards for granting anonymity. See the section on transparency for more.)

## **Honesty online**

Just as we do in the “real” world, we identify ourselves as NPR journalists when we are working online. So, if as part of our work we are posting comments, asking questions, tweeting, retweeting, blogging, Facebooking or doing anything on social media or other online forums, we clearly identify ourselves and that we work for NPR. We do not use pseudonyms when doing such work.

NPR journalists may, in the course of their work, “follow” or “friend” Twitter accounts, Facebook pages and other social media sites created by political parties and advocacy groups. But we do so to monitor their news feeds, not to become participants, and we follow and friend sites created by advocates from all sides of the issues. It’s as basic a tool as signing up to be on mailing lists used to be.

If in their personal lives NPR journalists join online forums and social media sites, they may follow the conventions of those outlets and use screen names that do not identify who they are. But we do not use information gathered from our interactions on such sites in our reports for NPR. If we get ideas for stories, we treat the information just as we would anything we see in the “real world” — as a starting point that needs to be followed by open, honest reporting.

Finally, we acknowledge that nothing on the Internet is truly private. Even on purely recreational or cultural sites and even if what we’re doing is personal and not identified as coming from someone at NPR, we understand that what we say and do could still reflect on NPR. So we do nothing that could undermine our credibility with the public, damage NPR’s standing as an impartial source of news, or otherwise jeopardize NPR’s reputation. In other words, we don’t behave any differently online than we would in any public setting or on an NPR broadcast.

#### **Case Study**

#### **THERE IS NO PRIVACY ON THE WEB.**

Imagine, if you will, an NPR legal correspondent named Sue Zemencourt. She’s a huge fan of Enormous University’s basketball team and loves to chat online about EU. She posts comments on blogs under

the screen name “enormous1.” One day, an equally rabid fan of Gigormous State (“gigormous1”) posts obnoxious comments about EU.

Sue snaps. Expletives and insults fly from her fingers to the webpage. They’re so out-of-line that the blog blocks her from submitting any more comments — and discovers that her i.p. address leads back to NPR. The blog’s host posts that “someone at NPR is using language that the FCC definitely would not approve of” and describes what was said. Things go viral.

The basically good person that she is, Sue publicly acknowledges and apologizes for her mistake. But that doesn’t stop *The Daily Show* from satirizing the “NPRNormous Explosion.”

Damage done.

Be circumspect about your behavior, even when the exchange feels private or anonymous. Even an email to a trusted recipient can be made public, with or without the recipient’s knowledge or consent.

#### **ONLINE SOURCES SHOULD BE ON-THE-RECORD TOO.**

In today’s world, many contacts with sources are made online — via emails and social media sites. As we discuss in the guidelines about accuracy and transparency, NPR pushes to keep its interviews on-the-record. The same is true of our “virtual” interactions with sources. We make that clear to potential sources when we reach out to them.



# Independence

To secure the public's trust, we must make it clear that our primary allegiance is to the public. Any personal or professional interests that conflict with that allegiance, whether in appearance or in reality, risk compromising our credibility. We are vigilant in disclosing to both our supervisors and the public any circumstances where our loyalties may be divided - extending to the interests of spouses and other family members - and when necessary, we recuse ourselves from related coverage. Under no circumstances do we skew our reports for personal gain, to help NPR's bottom line or to please those who fund us. Decisions about what we cover and how we do our work are made by our journalists, not by those who provide NPR with financial support.

## Conflicts of interest

It's not always easy to detect when something we have a personal or professional stake in might conflict — or appear to conflict — with our duty to report to the public the fullest truth we can. Conflicts of interest come in many shapes — financial holdings, romantic relationships, family ties, book deals, speaking engagements, and others. It's important to regularly review how our connections are entangled with the subjects of our reporting, and when necessary, to take action.

In minor cases, we might satisfy an apparent conflict by prominently disclosing it, and perhaps explaining to the public why it doesn't compromise our work. When presented with more significant conflicts that might affect our ongoing work, our best response is to avoid them. But some conflicts are unavoidable, and may require us to recuse ourselves from certain coverage. More specific guidance on how to make these decisions appears in the sections below.

### **WE DO NOT EXPLOIT OUR ACCESS TO PRIVATE INFORMATION, OR SKEW THE NEWS FOR OUR GAIN.**

As journalists, we regularly acquire access to confidential information. The only acceptable use of that information is to inform the public. This means we must scrupulously avoid any appearance that we've skewed our journalism to enrich ourselves or our associates.

These considerations obviously apply in straightforward conflict-of-interest cases, such as when we own stock in a subject of news coverage, but we must also apply them when we discuss with supervisors any potential media products that emerge from our reporting, such as books or movie projects. Say a political reporter uncovers evidence of illegal activity by a presidential candidate, and the resulting media firestorm results in a book offer. That reporter should sit down with a supervisor before entertaining any such offer.

We do not share confidential information with anyone inside or outside of NPR who intends to use that information for personal or institutional gain, excepting standard journalistic practices such as sharing information as a member of a news “pool.”

**Case Study**

**A JOURNALIST CONVICTED FOR USING CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION.**

R. Foster Winans wrote the column “Heard on the Street” for the *Wall Street Journal* from 1982-1984. He was investigated by the SEC for using or leaking non-public information he gathered as a reporter for the purpose of making financial investments. He was criminally charged with insider trading. Winans had admitted that he made money from leaking info, but pleaded not guilty to criminal charges, claiming that the insider trading laws were not designed to target journalists. Several commentators have said that regardless of whether it was illegal (it was – his conviction was upheld by the Supreme Court in a 1987 case called *Carpenter v. U.S.*), it was certainly unethical. Winans himself, in his book *Trading Secrets*, acknowledged that the conduct was “technically unethical for a journalist.”

**WHEN TO DISCLOSE, AND WHEN TO RECUSE.**

All NPR journalists, including those of us who work for the arts and music desks, must tell our supervisors in advance about potential conflicts of interest. When first assigned to cover or work on a matter, disclose to your immediate supervisors any business, commercial, financial or personal interests where such interests might reasonably be construed as being in actual, apparent or potential conflict with our duties. This includes situations in which a spouse, family member or companion is an active participant in a subject area that you cover. In the financial category, this does not include an investment by you or your spouse, family member or companion in mutual funds or pension funds that are invested by fund managers in a broad range of companies (unless, of course, the assignment concerns those specific funds).

When a spouse, family member or companion is involved in political activity, be sensitive to the fact that this could create real or apparent conflicts of interest. In such instances, advise your supervisor so that it can be determined whether you should recuse yourself from a certain story or certain coverage.

**Case Study**

**WHEN A SPOUSE BECOMES INVOLVED IN POLITICS.**

In October of 2011, *All Things Considered* host Michele Norris’s husband accepted a position with President Obama’s re-election campaign.

As Michele explained in a note to the NPR staff, she raised the potential conflict of interest before it became an issue:

“I need to share some news and I wanted to make sure my NPR family heard this first. Last week, I told news management that my husband, Broderick Johnson, has just accepted a senior adviser position with the Obama Campaign. After careful consideration, we decided that Broderick’s new role could make it difficult for me to continue hosting ATC. Given the nature of Broderick’s position with the campaign and the impact that it will most certainly have on our family life, I will temporarily step away from my hosting duties until after the 2012 elections. I will be leaving the host chair at the end of this week, but I’m not going far. I will be wearing a different hat for a while, producing signature segments and features and working on new reporting projects. While I will of course recuse myself from all election coverage, there’s still an awful lot of ground that I can till in this interim role.

“This has all happened very quickly, but working closely with NPR management, we’ve been able to make a plan that serves the show, honors the integrity of our news organization and is best for me professionally and personally.”

To review:

- Michele recognized that her husband’s position in the Obama campaign would unduly complicate ATC’s coverage of the presidential election.
- She appropriately raised the issue with senior management before her husband formally took the job.
- A plan was put together that would allow her to continue being a key contributor to NPR’s news operations, but would also separate her from its coverage of politics.

## Interacting with funders

Our journalism is made possible by diverse funding sources, including donations from members of the public, grants from foundations and government agencies, and paid sponsorships and underwriting. While we value all who support our work, those who fund us do so in the knowledge that our journalism serves only the public. We believe our strength as a business is premised solely on high-quality, independent journalism in the public interest. All NPR employees – journalists as well as sponsorship, communications and development staff – are committed first and foremost to that service.

**“If the [business and editorial] sides of a news-providing organization are really working at cross purposes, the journalism tends to be on the side that is corrupted.”**

Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel,  
*The Elements of Journalism*

At NPR, the journalists – including senior news managers – have full and final authority over all journalistic decisions. We work with all other divisions of the company towards the goal of supporting and protecting our journalism. This means we communicate with our sponsorship and development departments to identify

areas where we hope to expand our reporting. It also means we may take part in promotional activities or events such as coordinated fund drives, listener support spots and public radio audience-building initiatives.

But we observe a clear boundary line: NPR journalists interact with funders only to further our editorial goals, not to serve the agendas of those who support us.

### **STICK WITH STORYTELLING. STEER CLEAR OF SELLING.**

There's no one better than an NPR journalist to describe the value, impact and character of our journalism. So we may be called upon to talk about our work with those who might support it, whether over the air during a pledge drive or in person during a meeting with prospective funders. But in all our interactions with potential funders, we observe this boundary: We're there to tell our story, not to discuss the agendas of our supporters. This means we may describe the goals and ambitions of our editorial agenda, promote the value of our work and the worthiness of supporting it, or recount what we've experienced in our reporting.

Understand that donors may express opinions about the subjects we cover. Don't assent to those opinions or express your own.

These are nuanced lines to tread, and no NPR journalist should feel compelled to participate in meetings with prospective donors or foundations. Again, our sponsorship and development departments are there to support us in our service to the public, not vice versa. Part of the job of these departments is making our funders aware that we will be editorially blind to their support – that we'll conduct our journalism with no favor or slight to them or their interests. They also vet potential supporters to make sure their interests don't present an actual or apparent conflict with our mission.

We've often spoken of a "firewall" that separates NPR's journalists from our funders. Properly understood, the firewall is a useful metaphor. In engineering, a firewall isn't an impassable boundary, but rather a barrier designed to contain the spread of a dangerous or corrupting force. Similarly, the purpose of our firewall is to hold in check the influence our funders have over our journalism.

### **WHEN APPROPRIATE, DISCLOSE FUNDING RELATIONSHIPS IN RELATED REPORTS.**

NPR is fortunate to have hundreds of sponsors, funders and donors. At times, NPR reports stories about corporations, organizations or individuals who support our programming. As we outline throughout this handbook, we observe many boundaries to ensure that funding does not skew our coverage.

We are scrupulous in disclosing funding relationships that might foster the perception that our supporters have influenced our work. At the same time, a laundry list of disclosures would clutter our programs, rendering appropriate disclosures meaningless, so we avoid rote disclosures each time a supporter is mentioned in our coverage. Whether or not to disclose a funder during the course of a particular story is a careful judgment made by editors and producers on a case-by-case basis. As always, we act carefully and thoughtfully to strengthen the public's confidence in the independence of our work. For this reason, it's also important to note that NPR journalists do not read funding credits on-air or online.

### **DON'T ENTER CONTESTS BY THOSE WHO WOULD INFLUENCE OUR COVERAGE.**

We do not enter journalism contests or competitions or serve on award committees when groups that have an interest in influencing our coverage are sponsoring the honors. All entries for contests or competitions and awards committee memberships must be approved by supervisors.

We often receive honors we have not solicited. Of course, laurels are always welcome. But when an award – unsolicited or otherwise – comes with cash or other rewards attached, consult Ethics before accepting.

## **Owning our news agenda**

Our work depends on both the cooperation of sources and the generosity of supporters. But we depend on a broad, diverse network of sources and supporters, and no party is so critical to our work that we would bend our news agenda to its ends.

### **DON'T ALLOW SOURCES TO DICTATE OUR COVERAGE.**

We don't allow sources to dictate how a topic will be covered, or which other voices or ideas will be included in the stories we do. Nor do we pay for information from sources or newsmakers.

We avoid submitting questions to anyone in advance unless a senior news manager approves doing so after extensive discussion about why it may be necessary. This sometimes comes up when we are seeking interviews with foreign leaders. And parties in complicated legal cases may insist on having questions submitted in writing in order to give them a chance to gather all relevant documents. If questions are submitted in advance, this will be disclosed in our coverage.

### **OUR SUPPORTERS DO NOT SHAPE OUR COVERAGE.**

NPR greatly appreciates the financial support it receives from individuals, from foundations and from corporations. Their support is essential. At the same time, NPR makes its own decisions about what stories to cover and how to report them. Neither the people and organizations who support NPR financially, the sources we come in contact with, our competitors nor any others outside NPR's newsroom dictate our thinking.

### **AVOID PREVIEWING STORIES WITH SOURCES.**

For purposes of accuracy and fairness, there are times when we may want to review portions of a script with a source or read back a quotation to ensure we captured it correctly. We may also play audio or read transcripts of an interview to a third party if the purpose is to get that party's reaction to what another person has said. Otherwise, however, the public is the first audience for our work — we don't preview scripts or stories in advance of their broadcast or posting with sources, subjects of coverage or other parties outside NPR.

### **AVOID NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENTS AND BE CAREFUL WITH EMBARGOES.**

We avoid non-disclosure agreements — contracts that would require us to withhold certain information — except in rare circumstances and with the approval of the appropriate senior manager (email Ethics). And as with any written agreement, we send non-disclosure agreements to our legal team for review (look for LegalAlert in the NPR internal email address book) before we sign them.

We, like other major news outlets, do often agree to “embargoes” on news. In such cases the information is not to be reported until an agreed-upon time in the near future. We reserve the right, however, to report the news if the embargo has been “broken” by another news outlet or if because of some development we judge that the public’s interest would best be served by disclosing the information now instead of later.

### **USE PRESS RELEASES AND OTHER HANDOUT MATERIALS CAREFULLY.**

We must take into account that press releases and other handout materials (such as images) from organizations we cover are usually delivered with the intent of portraying the subject in the best possible light. We don’t publish staged photos unless there’s a compelling news reason for doing so. If there is, we disclose this fact to the audience.

### **WE OWN OUR REPORTING.**

Our notes, audio and working materials from our journalistic work belong to NPR. We won’t turn them over to government officials or parties involved in or considering litigation, nor will we provide information we’ve observed in the course of conducting journalism. If such materials or information are requested pursuant to governmental, administrative or other legal process, immediately consult your supervisor and the legal department.

### **WHEN POSTING OR GATHERING MATERIAL ONLINE, CONSIDER TERMS OF SERVICE.**

It’s important to keep in mind that the terms of service of a social media site apply to what we post there and to the information we gather from that site. Also: The terms might allow for our material to be used in a different way than intended. Additionally, law enforcement officials may be able to obtain our reporting on these sites by subpoena without our consent — or perhaps even our knowledge. Social media is a vital reporting resource for us, but we must be vigilant about keeping work that may be sensitive in our own hands.

### **BE AWARE OF OTHER MEDIA, BUT EXERCISE YOUR OWN NEWS JUDGMENT.**

NPR journalists do not put their heads in the sand when good stories appear elsewhere. By the same token, we shouldn’t be in the regular business of adopting other news organizations’ assumptions about what’s important in framing two-ways, shaping reporter assignments or bringing in commentaries.

(Source: Managing editor’s note to staff, 1996.)

## Outside work

NPR offers us the chance to reach huge audiences on the radio and on the Web. In exchange, as we said above, we agree to not compete with NPR and to make it the primary outlet for the journalism we do.

NPR also encourages us to take advantage of other opportunities – so long as they do not interfere or conflict with the work we do for the company. NPR journalists write books, magazine pieces and newspaper articles. We appear on panels and give speeches. Television discussion shows value our expertise. Universities ask us to teach and lecture. These are good things. They offer us the chance to stretch, to reflect on our work and to broaden the reach of our journalism.

But outside work can also present significant challenges. It places additional demands on our time, which is often precious. It requires working with organizations that have different goals and standards than NPR does. And it can sometimes present entanglements that conflict with our journalistic independence.

So we must be selective about these opportunities and vigilant about the challenges they pose. We must seek permission in writing from our supervisors for all outside freelance and journalistic work, whether paid or volunteered, from written articles to speaking appearances. (Details on [seeking approval for outside work](#) are below.) As we expressed at the outset of this handbook, keep in mind that we don't want our managers to be confronted with any rude surprises.

### **WE DON'T COMPETE WITH NPR.**

Because our primary professional responsibility is to NPR, we never work in direct competition with NPR. For example, we don't break a story for another news outlet before offering it to NPR. There are times when we may secure representation for ourselves from agents and publicists. In such cases, it's incumbent on us to ensure that our personal representatives are working closely with the communications department, which represents all NPR journalists.

### **AVOID DOING WORK FOR THOSE WE COVER.**

In general, we don't do outside work for government or agencies principally funded by a government, or for private organizations that are regularly covered by NPR. This includes work that would be done on leaves of absence.

This means we don't ghostwrite or co-author articles or books or write reports – such as annual reports – for government agencies, institutions or businesses that we cover or are likely to cover. We may permit exceptions for activities that don't seem to pose a risk of undermining our credibility. Speaking to groups that might have a relationship to a subject that NPR may cover requires high-level approval; contact Ethics.

Note: An NPR journalist who covers a specific topic generally cannot work for agencies or organizations even if they are not connected to his or her beat. In most cases the conflict is attached to NPR the organization, not the individual, and NPR's interest is in avoiding even the perception of bias.

## **BOOK PROJECTS AND RECURRING APPEARANCES REQUIRE SPECIAL ATTENTION AND COORDINATION.**

Book projects can be of particular concern because they may require extended, unpaid leaves of absence. Such leaves need to be carefully coordinated with NPR management. If the book will be based on work we've done for NPR, we must discuss in good faith with NPR issues of rights.

Similarly, recurring appearances on shows outside of NPR can jeopardize our primary work, both by cutting into our available time and by subjecting us to the editorial agenda of producers who may not share our standards. If cleared by your supervisor to appear multiple times on another organization's program, you do not need to seek formal permission each time an invitation is extended. But do regularly check in with your supervisor to ensure that the time required doesn't interfere with your NPR duties. And if there is a significant change in the program's format or in the nature of what you're expected to say or do, talk it over with your supervisor again. Programs and times change. NPR can revoke its permission if senior management determines that the appearances harm either the organization's or the journalist's reputations.

We don't enter into contracts with other media outlets without approval from senior news management and NPR's legal department. Understand that in most cases permission will not be granted.

## **HOW WE RESPOND TO OUTSIDE REQUESTS (APPEARANCES, INTERVIEWS, ETC.).**

NPR journalists are in high demand. We get many requests for media appearances, interviews and other outside work. To manage these requests, we collaborate with our colleagues in NPR's Marketing and Communications Division. We value their judgment and support.

NPR seeks out opportunities for public appearances for NPR journalists, and also receives many requests for our journalists to make speeches or otherwise appear at events. These requests come from member stations, academic institutions, professional organizations and many others. NPR generally views these as opportunities to extend our work and foster valuable connections outside of our company.

In order to get the go-ahead for an appearance, you should seek approval from your supervisor. Supervisors, in turn, should consult with Talent Relations, the unit within Marketing and Communications that is charged with managing this entire process (look for "TalentRelations" in the internal email address book). They'll assist with everything from event vetting, to negotiating honorariums, arranging travel, and preparing journalists for appearances. Many requests, whether for a specific journalist or not, come first to Talent Relations. They gauge the appropriateness of each request, and then clear it with the journalist and his or her supervisor to ensure that it doesn't present ethical concerns or coverage conflicts. Then they invite the journalist to participate.

If an opportunity presents a new, complex or difficult ethical question, or if a supervisor and a journalist disagree about an event's ethical merit, it should be discussed with the Standards and Practices Editor.

- **Agents and event appearances:** Several NPR journalists are represented by agents who book their appearances. These appearances also need to be approved by the journalist's supervisor and vetted through Talent Relations prior to confirming and publicizing the booking.



- **Work on NPR's behalf:** Occasionally NPR will ask our journalists to make appearances to outside organizations because such appearances are valuable to NPR. In these cases, our journalists will not need to take time off.
- **Media requests:** The role of NPR's Media Relations team is to field requests from outside media for interviews or media appearances with NPR journalists. In addition, Media Relations proactively pitches and places NPR journalists. When Media Relations receives an outside request, the team assesses the merits of the request and consults the relevant journalist and his or her supervisor for approval before clearing the request and setting up the opportunity. When Media Relations asks you to do an interview or make an appearance, you can assume that this has already been cleared with your supervisor.

Media requests of any kind that *don't* come from Media Relations - including off-the-record background interviews - must be approved by Media Relations in advance (look for "MediaRelations" in the NPR email address book). In most cases, Media Relations will clear, arrange and sometimes sit in on the interview.

NPR supervisors and the communications team will respond to requests as quickly as possible and in accordance with the union contract. We understand that they won't say "yes" to everything. And we know that NPR can revoke its permission if senior management decides that an appearance (or in some cases, recurring appearances) could harm either the organization's or the journalist's reputation.

Our goal is to encourage NPR journalists to be visible as ambassadors of NPR journalism, and to build their reputations as professionals while assuring that all appearances are consistent with NPR's ethical standards and our priorities.

#### **THESE SITUATIONS REQUIRE SPECIAL PERMISSION.**

A few special circumstances:

- **Speaking agencies and agents:** NPR journalists who enlist the services of agencies or agents to obtain paid speaking engagements or other opportunities must go through all the steps described above — like any other NPR staffer — before accepting any such offers.
- **Partisan events:** As we mention in this handbook's chapter on Impartiality, we avoid appearances that call into question our impartiality, including situations where our appearance may appear to endorse the partisan agenda of a group or organization. This might include, for example, participating in political debates or forums sponsored by groups that advocate particular perspectives on issues NPR covers.
- **Charitable fundraisers:** NPR journalists are frequently asked to speak or appear at charitable events. We typically turn down these requests. Even when a cause is charitable, it may still pose a conflict, or the organization might have political aims at odds with our commitment to impartiality.

- **Nonfiction writing for books or films:** Any NPR journalist intending to write a non-fiction book, TV or movie script or other guiding documents for non-radio productions based in whole or substantial part on assignments they did for NPR must notify NPR in writing of such plans before entering into any agreement with respect to that work. NPR will respond as soon as possible as to whether it has any objections to the project.
- **Leaves of absence:** While employed by NPR, including during leaves of absence, we do not perform work for those NPR covers, including ghostwriting or co-authoring materials or reports, making speaking appearances, or offering advice or consulting services. This extends both to private individuals and organizations we cover and to organizations and agencies principally funded by the government.
- **Public relations:** In general, we do not engage in public relations work, paid or unpaid. Supervisors may grant exceptions for certain volunteer, nonprofit and nonpartisan activities, such as participating in the work of an institution of worship, or a professional or charitable organization, especially if the journalist is a member of the organization in question and the work would not conflict with NPR's journalism.
- **Endorsements:** Just as we generally avoid engaging in p.r. work, we also refrain from marketing for books, movies, performances or other products that are not our own. This means that while we may offer reviews or praise for products we've encountered, we usually avoid offering promotional endorsements or blurbs, or serving as spokespersons. Supervisors may grant exceptions for endorsements that don't undermine or conflict with our work, meaning we have no financial interest in the endorsement and it doesn't present a conflict with any subject we cover. If we are granted such an exception, it bears stating that we read the book before commenting on it.
- **Promotional events:** We avoid appearances at private industry or corporate functions, especially in settings where our appearance may be used to market a company's services or products. Supervisors may grant exceptions for appearances intended to promote NPR's journalism, promotions for works by NPR journalists (e.g. book tours), or promotions for those volunteer, nonprofit and nonpartisan organizations in which we claim membership — for example, organizations that promote and support journalistic endeavors.

### **HOW DOES IT AFFECT YOUR WORK FOR NPR?**

When considering an outside opportunity, ask how it might interfere with your work and whether it might damage your credibility or that of NPR. We avoid conflicts of interest — it would not be appropriate, for example, for an NPR journalist to be paid to speak by a corporation or group that NPR covers. And we refrain from appearing on television discussion shows where the format is designed to produce heated, highly political debates. We go on TV to talk about our reporting and the news of the day, not to offer opinions (with the obvious exceptions of our music, arts and books critics — and, if any are hired, news commentators). If asked to offer opinions when on the air, we

rely on our reporting and offer context — citing, for example, what public opinion polls signal about how an issue is playing rather than our personal opinions.

We let our reporting, not our personal opinions, guide our actions and comments in all types of public settings, from live appearances on TV to postings on social media sites.

## **Paying our own way**

NPR pays the newsgathering expenses of its journalists. We don't allow sources or subjects of coverage to pick up the check for dinner or pay our travel expenses, we respectfully turn down gifts or other benefits from those we cover, and we don't sell materials sent to us for review.

There may be times when unusual circumstances lead us to make exceptions. For example, in combat zones, embedding with U.S. military units may be the only practical way to determine what's happening on the front lines. In some foreign settings, declining a meal or gift might be taken as a breach of respect.

But our journalism must not be tainted by suspicions of quid pro quo. At all times, we make clear to those we cover that their cooperation, charity or assistance — while appreciated — won't skew our efforts to fully report the truth. And we disclose to our audience any instances in which we've accepted from our sources anything but information.

### **HOW TO HANDLE GIFTS, SPEAKING FEES AND HONORARIUMS.**

The people and organizations we include in our coverage are often appreciative of our work and happy to appear in it. But we don't accept compensation, including property or benefits of any kind, from people or institutions we cover or put on the air, except gifts of token value (hats, mugs, t-shirts, etc.). If we receive unsolicited gifts of significant value, we thank the sender, explain our policy and return the item (or, if it's perishable, direct it to a worthy cause unaffiliated with NPR).

Of course, it's not always easy to draw a line between a valuable gift and a small token of appreciation, and it's not always practical to decline or return the item. In some cultural settings, it may be an insult to decline a small gift or a dinner invitation. In such situations, we trust our journalists to do the right thing.

In any event, we would not let our work be affected. And we act, as always, with the understanding that the perception of undue coziness with our sources can be as damaging as the reality. If there's any question of whether a gift rises above the token-value threshold, consult your supervisor.

In instances such as conferences and conventions where food is provided as a convenience for the press as a whole, it's acceptable to partake. With the approval of a supervisor, we may also accept honorariums, paid travel and meals for speaking engagements and awards ceremonies, but only from educational or nonprofit groups not engaged in significant lobbying or political activity. Determining whether a group engages in significant lobbying or political activity is the responsibility of the journalist seeking permission, and all relevant information must be fully disclosed to supervisors.

## **REVIEW MATERIALS ARE FOR REVIEWS, NOT PERSONAL GAIN.**

We may accept free event passes, copies of books or other materials for the purpose of doing reviews or stories. These items belong to NPR and may not be sold. In many cases, they will be kept for possible future use and reference. They also may be distributed to staff for personal use (including donations to charities) after they are no longer needed.

## **Working for NPR while keeping the public first**

Although we work for NPR, our first loyalty is to the public. Because NPR is a prominent company with an important role in society, there are times when NPR is in the news. At such times - as in all others - NPR journalists keep the public's interest first and foremost.

## **HOW WE HANDLE COVERAGE OF NPR.**

NPR journalists cover NPR the same way they would cover any other company. Editorial decisions are made with an eye toward the news value of events at NPR just as editorial decisions are made regarding the news value of events at Sony or Apple or General Motors. This, of course, is much more easily said than done. Every journalist at NPR, from producers to editors to correspondents, has a stake in NPR's well-being, and it is impossible for any individual to completely isolate himself or herself from events at NPR. Still, when such events occur, the journalists involved in reporting on NPR separate themselves as best as possible from internal events, and any individuals in NPR's corporate leadership avoid imposing any influence on the journalists reporting on the company.

Any coverage of NPR itself is handled by NPR journalists with no involvement in the issue at hand. If necessary, a separate team is created by drawing members from desks or bureaus with no connections to the subject. They approach the story just as they would any other.

All editors and others who were "part of the story" are recused. This means that when an NPR journalist's actions or work are "news" — for good or bad — those who were involved in the assigning, reporting, editing and producing do not then play any part in the coverage.

This wall between those involved in the subject of the story and those who then cover it extends beyond NPR's journalists. No NPR employees from departments outside News — especially those who have had a hand in any official response to the subject from NPR — play any role in the organization's coverage of the situation.

Our goal is simple: to cover any such story just as we would if it involved another organization, and to take all such actions necessary to ensure that is possible.

**Case study**

**COVERING THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF AN NPR PARTNERSHIP.**

In January 2012, when NPR announced a partnership with Ford to install NPR's software in new cars, NPR editors decided the news warranted reporting. The editors involved took into consideration the concern that NPR could be perceived as using its news programming to further a corporate interest. They weighed that concern against the newsworthiness of the announcement, and made the decision to cover the announcement in a way that closely resembled coverage of similar technology announcements by other companies. Along with journalists at other news organizations, NPR journalists honored the embargo on the story, and made no effort to gain an inside advantage in reporting the announcement earlier or more completely than any other news organization.

**PROMOTE NPR'S WORK, NOT ITS BUSINESS PREROGATIVES.**

High-quality journalism will always be the best way to promote NPR. We also value NPR journalists telling their story. With approval from supervisors, NPR journalists may take part in promotional activities or events involving supporters of NPR, such as our coordinated fund drives, listener support spots for stations and public radio audience-building initiatives. But our job is to promote and encourage support for NPR's journalism. NPR journalists *do not* advocate in support of NPR's business or political initiatives.

# Impartiality

Our experiences and perspectives are valuable assets to our journalism. We enjoy the right to robust personal lives, yet we accept some unique professional obligations and limitations. Because our words and actions can damage the public's opinion of NPR, we comport ourselves in ways that honor our professional impartiality. We have opinions, like all people. But the public deserves factual reporting and informed analysis without our opinions influencing what they hear or see. So we strive to report and produce stories that transcend our biases and treat all views fairly. We aggressively challenge our own perspectives and pursue a diverse range of others, aiming always to present the truth as completely as we can tell it.

## Impartiality in our personal lives

As expressed in our Statement of Principles, we hold ourselves to a high standard. We work extraordinarily hard to prove ourselves worthy of the trust the public places in us. Our reputation as rigorous and impartial pursuers of truth is fundamental to protecting and strengthening that trust. As journalists and representatives of NPR, we are in the public eye.

We hold dear our right to have personal lives — to root for our favorite teams, to live according to our faith, to form deep personal relationships. Yet as journalists, like those in many other professions, we abide by some clear limitations on our private conduct. We don't put political bumper stickers on our cars, for example. We don't sign political petitions. We don't donate money to candidates, of course. Those are some of the easy examples.

But when it comes to protecting our impartiality, the limitations are often more nuanced than clear. Our cars may not be canvases for political expression, but how about those of our spouses? How do we respond when the conversation at a dinner party turns political? And what about when the deepest aspects of our lives — how we worship, whom we marry — become controversies or subjects worthy of news coverage?

### **OVERALL, CIVIC, CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES ARE FINE.**

NPR journalists may participate in civic and cultural events that do not pose conflicts of interest. However, it is always wise to anticipate ahead of time what political or partisan issues or causes might emerge within a civic or cultural event to avoid ethical problems. And we let our supervisors know about any such civic and cultural organizations we do actively engage with, so that any potential conflicts of interest can be headed off.

We can sit on community advisory boards, act as trustees at educational institutions and serve on the boards of religious organizations and nonprofit groups — so long as those organizations do not engage in significant lobbying or other political activity. We tell our supervisors about such activities, recuse ourselves from any related coverage and understand that NPR may revoke its approval if there are actual or perceived conflicts of interest.

We have the same right to practice religion — or not — as other Americans. But we do not let our religious or personal beliefs distort our coverage of events or other faiths.

**BE AWARE THAT A LOVED ONE’S POLITICAL ACTIVITY MAY CREATE A PERCEPTION OF BIAS.**

Some of our loved ones — including spouses, companions, close friends and children — may be involved in politics or advocacy. We are sensitive to the perception of bias. So we inform our supervisors and work with them to avoid even the appearance of conflicts of interest.

NPR journalists recuse themselves from covering stories or events related to their family members’ political activities. We may go so far as to change job responsibilities (for instance, moving off the “politics desk” to an area of coverage well removed from that subject). “You have the right to marry anyone you want, but you don’t have the right to cover any beat you want” if the potential conflicts appear to be too great, as Tom Rosenstiel of Pew’s Project for Excellence in Journalism said to the *Los Angeles Times*.

## **Impartiality as citizens and public figures**

Alongside our roles as journalists, we are also members of the public ourselves, with a stake in the future of our society and opinions about the direction it should take. So we may exercise our right to vote.

But privately expressing our political choices at the ballot box doesn’t negate our commitment to keeping our opinions to ourselves. This means that public expressions of those choices — such as taking a position in a public political caucus that chooses candidates — can be problematic. And while it may be appropriate for most NPR employees to affiliate with a particular political party when registering to vote, some NPR journalists who are responsible for coverage of politics or government should consider any ramifications of such party affiliation. If you find yourself having to publicly state your political preferences or affiliation as part of the voting process, talk with your supervisor about the issues this raises and how we might resolve them.

**DON’T SIGN, DON’T ADVOCATE, DON’T DONATE.**

We’re not advocates. We may not run for office, endorse candidates or otherwise engage in politics in a participatory or activist manner. Since contributions to candidates are part of the public record (and not a private expression of choice in a voting booth), those of us connected with news coverage may not contribute to political campaigns or referendums, as doing so would call into question NPR’s journalistic independence and impartiality.

This extends to instances where NPR as a company has taken a position on issues that affect us and our industry, such as federal funding for public broadcasting. Even when our company takes a stance on an issue, as journalists, we remain dedicated to reporting on the issues with journalistic rigor and impartiality.

It also means we should not sign petitions or otherwise contribute support or money to political causes or public campaigns. Also: we don't put political signs in our yards or bumper stickers on our cars, and if family members get involved in politics we recuse ourselves from any coverage that touches on their activities and we do our best to maintain our independence from their pursuits.

There may be cases where we can appropriately advocate for issues directly related to our journalistic mission (e.g. First Amendment rights, the Freedom of Information Act, a federal "shield law"). It also may be appropriate to donate money or time to organizations that advocate on such issues.

However, we discuss these exceptions prior to any advocacy with our supervisors. In most cases, permission need only be given once. But if there's a change in such an organization's mission or we're asked to taken on leadership roles that would put us in the public eye, we consult with those supervisors again.

### **❓ WOULD YOU SAY IT ON AN NPR PROGRAM?**

This is the key test for helping us sort through what's acceptable to say in public settings: In appearing on TV or other media including electronic Web-based forums, we should not express views we would not air in our roles as NPR journalists. We avoid participating in shows, forums, or other venues that encourage punditry and speculation rather than fact-based analysis.

### **WE DON'T SERVE ON GOVERNMENT BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS.**

NPR journalists may not serve on government boards or commissions. Generally, we avoid serving on boards, and we don't hold offices that would create conflicts of interest between our work for NPR and our responsibilities to the other institution. We have sometimes made exceptions to allow journalists to serve on the boards of institutions where such conflicts are unlikely, such as other journalism organizations or educational institutions. All such exceptions require approval from supervisors. And of course, if an NPR journalist serves on the board of an institution that becomes the subject of NPR's reporting, that journalist should be recused from any related coverage.

### **OUR STANDARDS OF IMPARTIALITY ALSO APPLY TO SOCIAL MEDIA.**

Refrain from advocating for political or other polarizing issues online. This extends to joining online groups or using social media in any form (including your Facebook page or a personal blog). Don't express personal views on a political or other controversial issue that you could not write for the air or post on NPR.org. These guidelines apply whether you are posting under your own name or — if the online site allows pseudonyms — your identity would not be readily apparent. In reality, anything you post online reflects both on you and on NPR.



Your simple participation in some online groups could be seen to indicate that you endorse their views. Consider whether you can accomplish your purposes by just observing a group's activity, rather than becoming a member. If you do join, be clear that you've done so to seek information or story ideas. And if you "friend" or join a group representing one side of an issue, do so for groups representing other viewpoints.

### **ON ATTENDING MARCHES, RALLIES AND OTHER PUBLIC EVENTS.**

There is real journalistic value in being an observer at public events such as a march or rally, even without a reporting assignment. But while we may observe, we refrain from actively participating in marches, rallies or public events involving political issues or partisan causes that our organization covers or may cover. Of course, the distinction between being a participant and being an observer can be subtle. But waving a picket sign or joining along in a cheer would be inappropriate. Again, we rely on your good judgment.

Since the nature of each event differs, it's wise to discuss these matters ahead of time with supervisors to figure out where ethical pressure points may exist or emerge. If attending such an event as an observer, take care in behavior, comments, attire and physical location not to reflect a participatory role.

When we cover political or partisan marches, rallies or public events, we should be clearly distinguished as working in a journalistic role – identifying ourselves as NPR journalists to the people we speak with, with our NPR identification on display.

#### **Case study**

#### **THE EVOLUTION OF OUR GUIDANCE ON MARCHES, RALLIES AND PUBLIC EVENTS.**

In 2010, the NPR News Code of Ethics included a concise, seemingly straightforward rule concerning marches and rallies. It read, in its entirety: "NPR journalists may not participate in marches and rallies involving causes or issues that NPR covers, nor should they sign petitions or otherwise lend their name to such causes, or contribute money to them."

When satirical newscasters Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert announced they were going to hold a rally on the Mall in Washington, D.C., in October 2010, many employees wondered how the ethics policy applied to the event. The gathering - a mashup of Stewart's "Rally to Restore Sanity" and Colbert's "March to Keep Fear Alive" - was clearly satirical. But it wasn't an apolitical comedy show, either. The comedians would use the occasion to extend critiques they often make on their shows, criticisms of our political system, media, and culture. Certainly these are "issues that NPR covers." And a bystander who spotted an NPR journalist cheering along with the comedians' barbs at various news subjects could fairly assume that the journalist shared the comedians' views, undermining our impartiality.

So memos went out reminding staff of the ethics policy, and clarifying that it did apply to the Stewart/Colbert event. The memos and the decisions they reflected offered plenty of fodder for the ensuing news cycle, and touched off a flurry of sharp, wide-ranging questions, including:

- Why weren't employees reminded of the policy prior to previous events such as the ones Glenn Beck and Al Sharpton had held earlier that fall?
- How do we distinguish between "observing" and "participating"? (The Washington City Paper's Michael Schaffer offered a notable tongue-in-cheek poke at the distinction.)
- If being a witness to world events is one of the essential components of journalism, should journalists be prevented from *observing* an event of significant public interest, even if the event has no direct bearing on their beat or coverage?

The evolution of the News Code of Ethics into this Ethics Handbook offered an opportunity to review our decision-making on the Stewart/Colbert event and to add helpful nuance to the guidance on making similar decisions in the future. This handbook's guidance on attending marches, rallies and other political events is different from its predecessor in several ways that won't be enumerated here. But we highlight the shift to underscore two broader themes that should play into all our thinking:

- First, the guideline - like many in this handbook - is intended not only to answer or preempt questions, but also to raise them. There's no easy one-size-fits-all answer to the question of how "participating" and "observing" differ, for example, but there's value in considering where our actions sit along that spectrum.
- Second, our thinking will evolve - as it has here - and should. We not only make decisions, we review them, we consider their effects and we learn from them. This too is characteristic of a healthy ethical newsroom guided by sound ethical principles.

#### **HONOR IMPARTIALITY IN SPEAKING APPEARANCES AND OUTSIDE WORK.**

When appearing on other media outlets, NPR journalists conduct themselves in accordance with NPR's standards of ethical behavior. In other words, when discussing the day's news we do not say or write things elsewhere that we would not say on NPR or NPR.org.

We do not express personal opinions in public appearances outside NPR — just as we would not on our own broadcasts. If we are part of a panel discussion or a current events roundup and are asked what we think about an issue, what we think a politician should do or what is likely to happen next, we give answers that are based on solid reporting, not opinion.

One simple tip: if you find yourself starting to say "I think," pause. Frame your answers around what your reporting tells you, what polls are saying or what history shows is likely to happen.

We avoid speaking to groups where the appearance itself might put in question our impartiality. This includes situations where our appearance may seem to endorse the agenda of a group or organization, as well as participation in some political debates and forums where the sponsoring groups or other participants are identified with a particular perspective on an issue.

## Impartiality in our journalism

Fair, accurate, impartial reporting is the foundation of NPR news coverage. On top of that foundation, we layer factual, reporting-driven analysis - breaking down news events and providing explanation and context to aid our audience in interpreting the news. A large part of what makes our work so valuable is our effort to transcend *how we feel* about a subject and impart to our audience *what we know* about it, and what we don't.

This is a lofty standard. The perception of bias is intensely subjective, hanging on the tiniest nuances - a gesture, a word, a slight intonation. Complicating matters is the fact that our audience doesn't only come to us for our news reporting and analysis, but for reflection, humor, commentary, criticism and much more. (Source: [Pew Research Center study](#), June 2010.)

But journalism is at the core of our enterprise. We should weigh the effect of all our actions on its credibility and integrity.

### **BEYOND NEWS – HOW COMMENTARY, CRITICISM AND ESSAYS FIT INTO OUR JOURNALISM.**

While news reporting and analysis are at the center of our work, NPR offers its audience much that isn't "just the facts" – such as essays reflecting on the news, commentaries on current affairs, and cultural criticism. Our audience values these offerings.

Valid news analysis flows naturally from deep, thorough reporting. Its role is to provide interpretation, explanation and context - breaking down stories to foster understanding, discerning important patterns in news events, revealing historical connections and comparisons, and articulating themes our reporting has unearthed.

For the most part, NPR journalists with a role in covering the news should stick to reporting and analysis. We should not tread beyond well-supported conclusions based on our reporting and should not present opinions as fact. Our aim is to give the public the evidence to weigh and develop their own opinions, without the intrusion of ours.

On some occasions, it may be appropriate for a journalist to deliver an essay reflecting on the news or events in our lives. Show hosts do this most regularly. These essays should be designed to cultivate a more personal bond with our audience and to add meaningful dimension to our coverage, not to inject our opinions. They should not call into question our fair and impartial reporting of the news. All our journalists - hosts, reporters and others - must work with editors and supervisors to ensure this standard is upheld in every essay we deliver.

**“In two separate studies, we have found that balanced and unbiased reporting is what drives listeners to tune in to NPR and is also what they perceive the defining characteristic of NPR to be.”**

*- Sarah Withrow, Senior Research Analyst in  
NPR's Audience Insight and Research  
department*

Such essays differ in tone and substance from commentary, the expression of opinion on items of public interest. By its very definition, a commentary is intended to put the author's opinions on display. Consequently, NPR journalists with a role in reporting and producing the news do not deliver commentaries. In selecting commentaries from independent writers, we honor our commitments to impartiality and fairness by presenting our audience with a variety of voices, encompassing many sides of an issue. Our commentaries must also hew to other Guiding Principles, reflecting honesty, accuracy and transparency.

Alongside news, essays and commentary, we also provide our audience with cultural criticism, showcasing works of art and entertainment and analyzing their qualities and merits. Criticism, of course, is inherently opinionated. We reserve our criticism for works of art and entertainment and do not opine on matters we cover in the news.

#### Case Study

#### **ESSAYS TO ASPIRE TO.**

Essays such as these exemplify all that essays are supposed to do, revealing valuable personal insights and reflections without offering opinions on issues we cover:

- Scott Simon's rumination on the value of changing our minds, after Christopher Hitchens' death (["Christopher Hitchens' Legacy of Defying Labels,"](#) 12/17/2011).
- Michel Martin on being a bystander to violence (["The Moral Dilemma in Witnessing Acts of Violence,"](#) 1/10/2011) and on the suicide of her brother (["Maybe Someday Love Will Cure Despair,"](#) 5/10/2010).
- Robert Siegel's meditation on Ground Zero in the wake of 9/11 (["Sifting Tattered Artifacts of World Trade Center Lives,"](#) 9/12/2001).
- Linda Wertheimer on the aftermath of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan (["Japan Quake Shakes Loose Memories of U.S. Disasters,"](#) 3/12/2011).
- Yuki Noguchi's reflection on the St. Louis Cardinals and what it means to be a fan (["Crazy Rituals: Connecting Sports Fans to the Game,"](#) 10/28/2011).

#### **WHEN LANGUAGE IS POLITICIZED, SEEK NEUTRAL WORDS THAT FOSTER UNDERSTANDING.**

Strive to use words and phrases that accurately deliver information without taking sides on emotional or political issues. Politically loaded language not only violates our commitment to be fair, but also gets in the way of telling good stories. It makes readers and listeners stop to consider whether we're biased in favor of one side or the other.

So, for example, we report about efforts to “overhaul” health care or tax policy, not the “reform” that advocates on all sides say they are pursuing. “Reform” is in the eye of the beholder. “Overhaul” is a better, less-charged word.

In such cases we go with what’s accurate. And err on the side of neutrality.

We also take the time to explain to our audience how certain words or phrases have taken on politically loaded meanings, as Joanne Silberner did in a November 1995 piece for *All Things Considered*. Reporting on the debate over certain abortions performed late in pregnancy, she noted that:

*This time, the debate even extends to what the procedure is called. Opponents call it a ‘partial birth abortion,’ while supporters of abortion rights prefer the medical term ‘intact dilation and evacuation.’ Abortion opponents say the procedure is brutal and inhumane to the fetus, but abortion rights supporters say it can save the life of the mother and allow her to become pregnant again.*

For guidance, NPR policy on many terms and phrases is collected on NPR’s internal wiki (under [Grammar & Usage Guide](#)). If you’re unsure and the subject isn’t covered there, ask the librarians and consult with our in-house experts — the correspondents and editors who cover controversial topics such as abortion, tax policy, immigration, climate change, etc. They have likely already worked through the issues. Also feel free to talk it over with the Standards and Practices Editor (email Ethics).

# Transparency

To inspire confidence in our journalism, it is critical that we give the public the tools to evaluate our work. We reveal as much as we practically can about how we discover and verify the facts we present. We strive to make our decision-making process clear to the public, especially when we find ourselves wrestling with tough choices. We disclose any relationships, whether with partners or funders, that might appear to influence our coverage.

## Revealing our process

Much of the work NPR journalists do to gather, verify and present our journalism is necessarily outside the view of our audience. But we must always give our audience a sense of how we've developed the stories we deliver. We never hide our reporting behind opaque evasions such as "NPR has learned." And if a story has occasioned a long conversation with multiple editors about how to handle an ethical tough spot, that might be a clue that the story should explain some of the decisions we made.

### **IDENTIFY ARCHIVAL MATERIAL CLEARLY.**

We tell listeners about the circumstances of an interview when that information will help put the piece in context and add to the listener or reader's understanding (such as when the interview took place if it was either before or shortly after a key event, the fact that someone was speaking to us while on the fly, etc.). Whenever it's not obvious (but important to know) how an interview was obtained, we should make it clear.

When our stories include tape or material from an earlier story, we identify it as such. The listener should not be left to think that any archival or previously obtained audio was gathered in the context of the current story. As an example, a story updating a controversy surrounding an individual would be misleading if it included new assertions of fact but only used past statements by that individual and failed to identify them as such.

### **HOW TO SOC OUT.**

NPR's "standard out cue" policy is either to SOC out from the place where the reporter is filing or, if the reporter is no longer there, to SOC out generically ("For NPR, I'm Joe Smith") and establish the "place" of the story in the intro and body of the story itself.

## Anonymous sources

Although NPR journalists do agree to talk to sources on background when necessary, NPR's strong preference is to have sources stay "on the record." Before any such information is reported, reporters must make every reasonable effort to get it on the record — if not from that source, then from somewhere else.

### **❓ IS THE SOURCE CREDIBLE, RELIABLE, AND KNOWLEDGEABLE?**

We use information from anonymous sources to tell important stories that otherwise would go unreported. This is not a solo decision - the editors and producers of these stories must be satisfied that the source is credible and reliable, and that there is a substantial journalistic justification for using the source's information without attribution. This requires both deciding whether it is editorially justified to let the person speak anonymously, and being satisfied that this person is who the piece says he is and is in a position to know about what he's revealing. We should never be in the position of having to verify these things after a story has been broadcast or published.

### **PRESS ANONYMOUS SOURCES HARD.**

Before we rely on information from anonymous sources, we press them hard on exactly what they know and how they know it — and we press them hard for as detailed a description as possible of who they are and their motivation (if any) to use in our reporting. Our goal is to tell listeners and readers as much as we can about why this person is being quoted.

So, for example, "a senior White House official who was at the meeting and heard what the president said," is the type of language we use. "An official" is not.

### **THE 'DON'TS' OF ANONYMITY.**

**No attacks.** In our coverage, anonymous or unnamed sources generally cannot make pejorative comments about the character, reputation, or personal qualities of another individual, or derogatory statements about an institution. We don't use such material in our stories, with rare exceptions. (If an individual is blowing the whistle on significant misdeeds or making an allegation of sexual assault, we may decide to air the person's claims. But we would only make such a decision after careful deliberation with senior news managers.)

**No disguises.** We may withhold a source's name who talks to us on tape or on the record, if that individual might be put in danger, legal jeopardy or face some other serious threat if their name is revealed. We may refer to the person without using a last name, if he or she is comfortable with that degree of anonymity and if we decide the situation meets our criteria for granting anonymity. But we don't use pseudonyms to replace their real name.

**No offers.** Occasionally in the course of our reporting, a source will agree to share information only if it's not attributed to him or her. Journalists should use their good judgment to determine whether the information merits such a decision. However, we do not *begin* our quest for interviews by promising to keep a source anonymous or off the record. Our goal is to get as much information as possible on the record.

### **A SUPERVISOR DECIDES IF ANONYMOUS NEWS IS SHARED.**

Individual NPR journalists — reporters, producers, bloggers and others — do not on their own have the authority to assure any individual that information s/he gives us anonymously will be reported on our airwaves or by NPR.org.

For sure, sometimes in the course of reporting we gather important information that a source will only reveal if the conversation is “off the record.” But the decision as to whether that information will be *reported* by NPR can only be made in consultation with a supervisor. As the level of importance of the information rises, so should the level of editor who is pulled into the conversation. There is no hard-and-fast rule. When in doubt, editors should always err on the side of caution and consult with the next person above them.

If a reporter and editor know ahead of time that a key interview can only be done if the source is granted anonymity, they should have a conversation in advance with a senior editor and make the case for granting it up front.

### **DESCRIBE ANONYMOUS SOURCES AS CLEARLY AS YOU CAN WITHOUT IDENTIFYING THEM.**

When a decision is made to use information that we have obtained from a source that must remain anonymous, we describe in as much detail as we can (without revealing so much that we effectively identify that person) how they know this information, their motivations (if any) and any other biographical details that will help a listener or reader evaluate the source’s credibility.

It is never enough to say “NPR has learned” something. It is not enough to report that “officials say” or “critics say” something, or that some detail is “reportedly” true. If it is important for listeners or readers to know, for example, what political party the source is from, we report that information. If it is important to know what agency the source is from, we report that. If it is important to know which side of an issue the source represents, we report that. We push to get as much detail as we can about how the source knows this information, and to get the source’s agreement to report as much of that detail as possible. Was she in the room when the meeting happened? Does he have a copy of the report? Did he participate in the investigation?

### **WHEN YOU CITE THE SOURCES OF OTHERS, ATTRIBUTE CLEARLY.**

When we attribute information to anonymous sources, it is assumed that these are our sources and that we have obtained the information firsthand from them. If this is not the case, and we are referring to reports in other news outlets based on anonymous sources of theirs, we are meticulous about attributing the information to those other outlets and we describe as fully as possible who those sources are.



# Accountability

We take full responsibility for our work, so we must always be ready and willing to answer for it. Just as careful attention to our sources makes a story stronger, careful listening to our public makes our journalism better. So we welcome questions or criticisms from our stakeholders and to the best of our ability, we respond. Mistakes are inevitable. When we make them, we correct them forthrightly, reflect on what happened, and learn from them.

## Corrections

We have a simple standard: Errors of fact do not stand uncorrected. If we get it wrong, we'll correct it.

### **MISTAKES ARE FIXED IN A TIMELY MANNER.**

Egregious mistakes — for example, reporting someone's death when they are in fact still alive — demand immediate correction on the air and/or online (if the information was also posted on NPR.org). There are no trivial mistakes, but errors of fact that do not significantly affect a story will be corrected by the same show that made the mistake at a regular time each week.

NPR's legal department should be consulted immediately about mistakes that might have legal consequences — and especially if a purported mistake is brought to our attention by a lawyer or the subject of our reporting and they are claiming or implying that NPR is liable for any damages. When in doubt, contact the legal team. (Look for LegalAlert in the NPR internal email address book.)

All corrections should be sent to [corrections@npr.org](mailto:corrections@npr.org) so that transcripts can be amended and online reports corrected. All corrections are posted at NPR.org. As a rule, we don't make "silent" corrections to our stories. We make corrections to help keep the public accurately informed, not to absolve ourselves of our mistakes.

### **SPEAK UP IF YOU SEE OR HEAR A MISTAKE.**

If you have good reason to think NPR got something wrong on the air or online — or that there was a serious defect in a report — you have an affirmative responsibility to speak up. The first stop should be your supervisor. If the supervisor does not think that a mistake was made, but you disagree, talk it over with the Standards and Practices Editor (or email Ethics). NPR journalists who come to their supervisors in good faith should have no concerns about stepping forward.

Sometimes, a member of the public will get in touch with us to report a mistake. We review all such feedback, and take it seriously, following the steps outlined above.

## Interacting with the public

NPR welcomes feedback from listeners and readers.

They can be words of praise that help us understand what the audience appreciates and whether we are fulfilling our obligation to serve the public. Sometimes they are as encouraging as [the comment from one All Things Considered listener](#) about a June 2011 report by Howard Berkes on the latest news in the investigation into West Virginia's Upper Big Branch mine accident.

"That coal mine disaster is one of those stories that usually comes and goes in American journalism," wrote Tom Blackburn of Florida. "In the near future, those stories may even stop coming, since none of the victims were rich and famous, and some of the malefactors are. But Mr. Berkes stuck with it, got to know the real people involved, probably knows more about it by this point than the officials he interviews and is doing a wonderful job of being both a reporter and a mensch."

But we can learn from criticism as well.

## Accountability online

The same ethics rules apply to what we broadcast on the radio and what we put online, and that means we're accountable for what we do on the Web.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA OUTLETS ARE PUBLIC SPACES.**

We know that everything we write or receive on a social media site is public. Anyone with access to the Web can potentially see what we're doing. And regardless of how careful we are in trying to keep them separate, our professional lives and our personal lives overlap when we're online.

The line between private and public activity has been blurred by these tools. Information from a Facebook page, blog entries, and tweets — even if they're intended to be personal messages to friends or family — can be easily circulated beyond the intended audiences. The content, therefore, represents us and NPR to the outside world — as do our radio pieces and stories for NPR.org. This applies to the people and organizations we choose to "friend" or "like" online as well. Those are content choices as much as a message or blog post. As in all our reporting, the NPR Guiding Principles guide our use of social media.

Rule of thumb: You should conduct yourself in social media forums with an eye to how your behavior or comments might appear if we were called upon to defend them as a news organization. In other words, don't behave any differently online than you would in any other public setting.

And a final caution — when in doubt, consult with your supervisor.

## **? CAN WE FOLLOW POLITICAL PARTIES OR ADVOCACY GROUPS RELATED TO OUR BEATS?**

If your work includes coverage of politics and social issues, can you “follow” or “friend” a political party or advocacy group?

Yes, if you’re doing it to keep up on what that party or group is doing. And you should be following those on the other side of the issues as well.

### **SELF-PROTECTION IS PART OF BEING ACCOUNTABLE ONLINE.**

Protect yourself: Use the highest level of privacy tools available to control access to your personal activity when appropriate, but don’t let that make you complacent. It’s just not that hard for someone to bypass those safeguards and make public what you thought was private.

Don’t be careless. Keep your opinions to yourself. Imagine what you say or write landing in an AP story or in *The Washington Post*, and imagine the damage that could cause you and NPR.

### **CONSIDER THE LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OF YOUR ACTIONS, REGARDLESS OF THE MEDIUM.**

Whether in a newscast or a tweet, “you always have to take into consideration what you’re saying, what you know, what you don’t know, and be thoughtful about not making libelous comments whatever the medium.” (Source: NPR’s Ashley Messenger, in an article on Poynter.org.)

In many cases, a journalist will be legally responsible for any statement he or she repeats, even if the statement is attributed to another source. There are a few exceptions, and one of them is Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which protects news organizations from defamation liability for content that’s created by a third party. Many experts believe this protection would extend to retweets. Citizen Media Law Project co-founder David Ardia put it this way in a Poynter.org story: “If a journalist or news organization were to retweet a defamatory statement, they would not be held accountable. If, however, they added a defamatory remark as part of the retweet, they could be.”

So, in theory, NPR would be protected if someone retweets a post that says something defamatory or inaccurate about someone. But be careful about adding comments that would make the message your own and destroy immunity.

But beyond the legal implications, it is important to consider our listeners and readers and the fact that they trust that the information we’re giving them is as accurate as we can make it. This extends to the information we tweet, retweet, blog, tumble or share in any other way on social media. And that’s why we don’t simply pass along information — even via something as seemingly innocent as a retweet — if we doubt the credibility of the source or news outlet. We push for confirmation. We look for other sources. We reach out to those closer to the story. In other words, we do some reporting.

# Respect

Everyone affected by our journalism deserves to be treated with decency and compassion. We are civil in our actions and words, avoiding arrogance and hubris. We listen to others. When we ask tough questions, we do so to seek answers -- not confrontations. We are sensitive to differences in attitudes and culture. We minimize undue harm and take special care with those who are vulnerable or suffering. And with all subjects of our coverage, we are mindful of their privacy as we fulfill our journalistic obligations.

## Respect for sources and subjects of coverage

We strive to live up to Roger Ebert's praise – to be “an oasis of clear-headed intelligence” amidst a “world of uproar.” That doesn't mean we paper over unpleasantness or shy away from difficult questions. It means we favor clarity over bombast. It means we pursue the truth with decency rather than ruthlessness, and humanity rather than indifference.

**Everywhere I go, as much as I can, I listen to National Public Radio. It's an oasis of clear-headed intelligence. Carefully, patiently, it presents programming designed to make me feel just a little better equipped to reenter the world of uproar.**

*- Chicago Sun-Times critic Roger Ebert*

The general public is the most important stakeholder in our work, but everyone we cover is also an important stakeholder. We practice ethical journalism by doing our best to minimize harm as we report information in the public interest.

### **STRIKE A CIVIL TONE IN ALL YOUR JOURNALISTIC INTERACTIONS.**

We are NPR. Reporters and producers in the field, bookers lining up interviews, engineers in the studios adjusting microphones, bloggers interacting with the NPR audience on the Web, librarians doing research and hosts engaging with interview subjects over the phone — we are all representing NPR. And when we interact with people, we are courteous and sensitive to their feelings. We don't take “no” for an answer when public officials are avoiding answering our questions. But even in our doggedness, we are polite and do not respond in kind to those who are less than courteous to us.

### **TAKE SPECIAL CAUTION WITH THOSE WHO ARE LESS MEDIA-SAVVY.**

We make sure our guests and interview subjects know what we want to talk with them about. But we are especially careful with those who have not been interviewed many times by many media outlets. While a U.S. senator, for example, can be expected to be comfortable in front of microphones and cameras, and to be “ready to go” relatively quickly, a private individual from Chicago deserves a few extra minutes of our time before the tape starts rolling.

### **BE CONSIDERATE OF COMMUNITY NORMS.**

Realize that different communities – online and offline – have their own culture, etiquette, and norms, and be respectful of them. Our ethics don’t change in different circumstances, but our decisions might.

The foundation of respect in reporting on any community is awareness. Strive to be knowledgeable about the culture, and be attuned to gaps in your understanding. Often your colleagues can be a terrific resource to help you get up to speed on unfamiliar settings.

Consider as well how your conduct in a community will affect your reporting. As you adjust behaviors such as language and dress in different situations, think about what might be most helpful or harmful to effective reporting.

Also, appreciate that journalism can be an intrusive act, and conduct yourself as a decent guest of the community where you’re reporting. If the customary etiquette is to remove your shoes upon entering a building, for example, it’s appropriate to oblige.

And of course, factor in your own security. In unstable situations, for example, journalists can be targets of violence. At such times, the most appropriate consideration may merely be blending in. As always, we rely on your good judgment.

### **RESPECT NPR’S COPYRIGHT.**

While we strongly encourage linking to NPR.org, you may not repost NPR copyrighted material to social networks without prior permission. For example, it is o.k. to link from your blog or Facebook profile to a story of yours on the NPR site, but you should not copy the full text or audio onto a personal site or Web page. You may accomplish this through the NPR API or widgets that NPR provides to the public. Assume the terms of use that apply to the public also apply to your usage in these situations.

## **Respect in sensitive circumstances**

NPR journalists show sensitivity when seeking or using interviews of those affected by tragedy or grief. That’s especially true when we’re dealing with children, anyone who is nervous about being interviewed, individuals who have difficulty understanding us because of language differences, and those who might be putting themselves in danger by speaking to us. If interviewing a witness to a crime, we must weigh carefully whether we are exposing the source to physical risk by identifying him or her by name as a potential witness, and whether there is potential for the individual to be accused as a participant.

“Sometimes when you’re talking with people living under coercive or oppressive governments, you know that they’re putting themselves at risk,” says Scott Simon. We consider it our duty to make sure they are aware of the potential ramifications. And even if they are fully informed and willing to go on the record, we may determine it’s still best not to reveal their names on the air or online.

### **TAKE SPECIAL CARE WITH MINORS.**

Be sure to consider legal issues when dealing with minors (generally defined as anyone under the age of 18). An interview of a minor about a sensitive subject requires us to secure permission from at least one of the minor’s parents (preferably both) or a legal guardian. Examples of sensitive subjects include cheating, sexual activity, involvement in gangs or crime, difficult family relationships, probation violation, out-of-wedlock pregnancy or parenthood, victims’ sexual abuse and similar topics that could have legal ramifications or lead to embarrassment. An interview of a minor in a special custodial situation, such as foster care, juvenile detention, or holding facilities for illegal immigrants, requires the consent of the person who has custody of the minor. Utah also requires the consent of both the custodian of the juvenile facility and the minor’s parent.

An interview on a non-sensitive topic (normal childhood activities, sports, book, movies, trips to the zoo, baseball and the like) does not require consent. Generally however, any interview on school premises will require the permission of the school authorities.

In cases where there is even a hint of doubt about whether to get consent, contact our legal team (look for LegalAlert in the NPR internal email address book).

#### **Case Study**

##### **REVEALING THE NAME OF A YOUNG SEX WORKER.**

Jonathan Kern recalls an NPR interview with a 14-year-old girl prostitute. She was willing to have her name used. The girl’s guardian said it was OK. NPR, however, decided that it was still best not to reveal her identity. As Jonathan says, 10 years later someone might Google the girl’s name and come across a story about her having been a child prostitute. She might be denied a job. Or a relationship might be ruined. It was decided that a 14-year-old wouldn’t be in a position to think through all such potential ramifications, and so couldn’t give informed consent.

### **REPORTING IN DISTRESSING SITUATIONS.**

Situations like school shootings require special care when interviewing visibly distressed people who may have witnessed horrific scenes. Witnesses such as teachers or students over 18 are preferable interviewees. If continued interviewing substantially increases the distress of a minor who is a witness, carefully balance the importance and quality of the information being obtained with the interviewee’s emotional state and decide

whether respect for the witness requires the interview to be ended. Also, discuss with your editor whether that interview should be aired.

### **WE DON'T NAME INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE ALLEGEDLY SUFFERED SEXUAL ASSAULTS.**

NPR does not name individuals who are the alleged victims of sexual assaults. There are exceptions at times – such as certain instances when such an individual goes public with his/her identity – and NPR editors will judge these instances on a case-by-case basis.

## **Respect for our audience**

### **USING POTENTIALLY OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE.**

There is a [lengthy document](#) that lays out NPR's policy on use of offensive language posted online. It is radio-centered, but the same rules apply to what we post on NPR.org.

The policy statement begins with this:

“As a responsible broadcaster, NPR has always set a high bar on use of language that may be offensive to our audience. Use of such language on the air has been strictly limited to situations where it is absolutely integral to the meaning and spirit of the story being told. ”

“We follow these practices out of respect for the listener,” the policy continues, and because in the post-Janet Jackson “wardrobe malfunction” world, federal regulators “have taken a much more aggressive line on what they regard as indecent or profane content.” The 2010 decision by a federal appeals court that invalidated the FCC's indecency policy has not prompted NPR to change its position.

That said, “there are rare instances where we will permit use of profane or indecent language for news or programmatic reasons. Such an instance is when the use of such language is so vital to the essence of the story that to excise or bleep it would be to distort it or blunt its power and meaning.”

An example (fair warning ... you're about to see an expletive): While traveling with U.S. Army forces in Iraq, NPR's Eric Westervelt was on the scene when the unit came under fire. At one point in his tape, an American soldier could be heard telling another man to “get the fuck under the truck.”

The NPR policy states that in this case “the use of profanity ... is editorially justifiable” because it meets the test of being “vital to the essence of the story” and cutting it out or bleeping the word would alter the power and meaning of the report.

As required by NPR's policy, “the piece was preceded by a language advisory in the intro read by the host, in addition to the DACS notices in advance to stations. NPR policy is to do both in all such instances for both legal and editorial reasons.”

Online, if sound or text containing potentially offensive language has been approved for use by a supervisor, it too must be preceded by text (and in the case of audio, a verbal warning as well) advising the NPR.org

audience that what follows contains language some may find offensive. When used in a blog, in most cases the warning should come before a “jump” to a second page. It should require a second “click” to get to the offensive material.

If used online, audio or video containing offensive material should never play automatically. To view or hear it, the user must choose to click “play.”



# Excellence

Our journalism is most valuable when we marry important truths with engaging narrative. We take enormous pride in the craftsmanship of our storytelling and in the quality of the words, sounds and images we use to help illuminate the world. When we edit, it is to add impact and clarity to our journalism -- never to slant or distort. We don't allow what is sensational to obscure what is significant. We aspire to tell stories that rise above the maudlin and mundane, avoiding shallow sentimentality. Above all, we do our best to faithfully and powerfully convey the truth.

## Excellence in storytelling

We're all fans of polished, beautiful storytelling. But is the quality of our work an ethical matter?

Yes. Our aspirations to excellence are an important element of our ethical decision-making. We believe it's our responsibility not just to tell stories, but to make them compelling, vivid and clear. That means we carefully edit our interviews to capture the meaning of our sources' words as clearly as we can. We make tough decisions on the lengths of our stories, keeping in mind both the complexity of the facts at hand and the needs of our audience.

When NPR was launched in 1971, the network [made clear its commitment to excellence](#), saying it would "provide listeners with an aural esthetic experience which enriches and gives meaning to the human spirit."

That commitment continues, on the air and online.

### STRIVE FOR THE "SIGNATURE STORY."

What are the characteristics of a "signature story" on NPR's airwaves or website? The bullet points in this 2004 memo offer valuable guidance about producing in the field and how to put together the type of excellent pieces that NPR strives for, on air and online. Although this was originally written for show hosts and producers, its guidance is valuable for all reporters:

- Original reporting.
- Multi-sourced.
- A character or characters that the audience will care about or find compelling.

- NOT a “what happened” story or same-day reporting.
- Humanizes some social, economic or political issue.
- Provokes in the listener an “I didn’t know that” response, or “this is really interesting or really disturbing.”
- Has enduring importance.
- Exceptional writing.
- The host is clearly engaged and curious on the air. [And now, online as well in our blogs.]
- Reveals new information.
- Is ambitious and enterprising.
- Offers context and balance.
- Is deep and well told.
- Remains engaging from top to bottom.
- Takes you somewhere – a sense of place is established.
- There is action – real people doing real things.
- Something happens during the story and the details unfold.
- Our host and reporter’s roles as rigorous journalists are evident.
- An intimacy occurs that is different than what happens in the studio. This is partly the way the interviews are mic’d in the field, and also something that occurs because of a different level of engagement between the host and the subject.
- The story is “sound rich” and textured. [And now, online it includes visuals and other “entry points” that enrich the experience.]
- The production values are extraordinary.
- It touches the head and the heart – and has emotional resonance.
- The “architecture” is strong. There’s a beginning, middle and end.
- The piece is cinematic.

(Source: Margaret Low Smith.)

## **EMOTION IS A POWERFUL COMPONENT OF STORYTELLING, WIELD IT CAREFULLY.**

Engaging, clear and genuinely human storytelling is a hallmark of NPR journalism. But our audience's perceptions of what we report can be influenced not only by the information we present but also by how we present it. Be cautious of nuances of voice, inflection, sound, visuals and other elements that can transform a straightforward news report into something that feels skewed. Personal observations, such as a display of grief or dismay in the wake of a tragedy, can sometimes be appropriate, but they must always be authentic and must not diminish our credibility.

After an earthquake and tsunami struck Japan, Margaret Low Smith sent a note to NPR correspondent Rob Gifford to tell him how much she appreciated how he covered the earthquake's aftermath. In his response, as Margaret Low Smith says, "Rob perfectly captures what distinguishes our reporting":

"It's hard not to write emotively when you are seeing what we are seeing," Rob writes. "The difficult part is to channel the emotion so it is not mawkish or shallow, but deep and powerful and raw."

In *The Elements of Journalism*, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel offer two helpful rules of thumb to help assess whether a display of emotion in a story is crossing the line:

- First, "it should come at those moments when any other reaction would seem forced – when emotion is the only organic response." (See, for example, [the case study on Jason Beaubien's report from Haiti](#).)
- Second, it "should disappear between the moment of discovery of a problem and the subsequent search for information meant to put the event into a broader and deeper context. Once journalists have reacted in a human way to what they have seen, they must compose themselves to search for answers, and that requires all of their skepticism, professionalism, and intellectual independence."

### **Case Study**

#### **CHOKING UP IN HAITI: A GENUINE MOMENT.**

While covering the devastation in Haiti following the January 2010 earthquake, NPR's Jason Beaubien was recording a two-way with *All Things Considered* host Melissa Block from outside a medical tent. [As he was describing the scene](#), his voice choked:

Jason: "Right now I'm outside the Villa Creole Hotel, which is in the Petionville neighborhood an elite neighborhood of Port-au-Prince. And it's really quite amazing, people have brought their injured children out front here because they know that there are medical – Western medical doctors staying inside. So, people have come here to try to get attention for – mainly for their children. There's a girl – I'm sorry. There's a girl right in front of me at the moment. [Jason chokes a bit; his voice breaks.] She's covered in bandages. She's laying on just some what are they they're from the deck chairs that would be by the pool. She's naked except for what looks like a tablecloth on top of her. And she keeps lifting her head and her lips are shaking."

(Soundbite of crowd as Jason catches his breath.)

Jason: “Sorry, Melissa.”

Melissa: “That’s okay.”

Jason: “It’s heartbreaking what’s happening here. And there are people just in the streets everywhere. When you drive through, there are tent cities that have been sort of set up just in little lots. People are clearly just living wherever they can.”

The exchange was broadcast, Jason’s moment of emotion included. It was “a display of grief or dismay in the wake of a tragedy” that was clearly authentic. And after that moment, Jason appropriately recomposes himself to address the important context. ([Audio: Jason Beaubien, reporting from Haiti.](#))

### **SOCIAL MEDIA ARE EXCELLENT TOOLS WHEN HANDLED CORRECTLY.**

Social networking sites, such as [Facebook](#), [MySpace](#), and [Twitter](#) have become an integral part of everyday life for millions of people around the world. As NPR grows to serve an audience that extends well beyond radio listeners, social media are becoming an increasingly important aspect of how we interact with our audiences. Properly used, social networking sites can be valuable parts of our newsgathering and reporting kits because they can speed research and quickly extend a reporter’s contacts. They are also useful transparency tools — allowing us to open up our reporting and editing processes when appropriate. We encourage our journalists to take advantage of them.

But reporting in social media spaces requires the same diligence we exercise when reporting in other environments. When NPR bloggers post about breaking news, they do not cite anonymous posts on social media sites — though they may use information they find there to guide their reporting. They carefully attribute the information they cite and are clear about what NPR has and has not been able to confirm.

When NPR correspondents go on the air they may mention discussions they’ve seen on social media sites as reflecting in part the tone or mood or general reaction to an event. But they realize that is not the same as a scientific survey of public opinion or a substitute for the kind of in-depth reporting that leads to a deep understanding of a subject.

And all NPR journalists understand that to get the most out of social media we need to understand those communities. So we respect their cultures and treat those we encounter online with the same courtesy and understanding as anyone we deal with in the offline world. We do not impose ourselves on such sites. We are guests and behave as such.

## **? OUR WORK DEPENDS ON ARTIFICE, BUT HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?**

From *Sound Reporting* by Jonathan Kern:

Unlike newspapers, which use ellipses to show that quotes have been compressed, or TV interviews, which sometimes include visible video dissolves, radio interviews [and audio interviews on the Web] don't reveal their edits in any obvious way. ... So be very careful that you don't change the meaning of what someone said when you trim an answer or question. As Sara Sarasohn puts it, the producer has to be faithful to the intentions of both the host and the guest. ...

If you're cutting an interview, it's understood that you may need to drop questions and answers, or shorten answers, or tighten up questions. But you may be tempted to go too far — collapsing two answers into one, rearranging the order of questions, and so on. When you make such extensive changes, the result may not reflect what actually happened in studio. ...

No one in public radio argues that it's ethical to deceive the listener. What people are constantly trying to define is when deception occurs. After all, the production process necessarily involves a certain amount of manipulation of audio, whether it's simply picking the actualities out of a raw interview or fading the sound of a farmer's combine under a reporter's voice track.

Our art depends on a certain amount of artifice. So how much is too much? Does every ambience bed suggest that the reporter is really on site, and not in the studio? Should a host always make clear to the audience when an interview has been recorded? If a live interview is rebroadcast on a 'rollover' of a program, should it be preceded by an announcement that it was previously recorded. Should the entire show start with such an announcement? ...

Whether you are a producer, reporter, editor or host, it's worthwhile at least to discuss these issues, and to try to come to some agreement with your colleagues about which production techniques might be off-limits.

## **? QUESTIONS FOR AN EXCELLENT STORY.**

- Does the story have the potential to be great, or just OK?
- Have I done everything I could to make it great? (While keeping all our other principles in mind, of course.)
- Will readers and listeners connect with the story?
- Is this a piece that goes deeper than other news outlets will?
- Does it step beyond the ordinary?

## **WEAK LANGUAGE IS SOMETIMES A SYMPTOM OF WEAK JOURNALISM.**

In his “Editor’s Manifesto,” Jonathan Kern reminds us of some of the most common mistakes we make in our writing. Be wary of pitfalls like the ones Jonathan cites here; they sometimes indicate that our reporting or our grasp of a story isn’t as robust as it should be:

- **Passive voice:** “The Bush administration is taking a hit for its position on global warming.” Who’s doing the hitting? We can’t picture the players if they’re not named.
- **Cliches and shopworn phrases:** “This decision comes in the wake of a ruling last week,” “the long-simmering dispute has provoked a storm of controversy,” “investors have been taken for a wild ride by the roller coaster stock market,” “public school teachers are leaving in droves” – these are just a few examples of the hundreds of modular phrases journalists use to write with a minimum of effort. It’s understandable: the reporters and news writers are under deadline pressure, and these are the phrases that spring to mind. The editor’s job is not to let them get away with it.
- **Generalities:** Keep a sharp eye out for phrases like, “Most people have never heard of,” “Many people think,” “The conventional wisdom is,” and their ilk. They are often simply wrong, and rarely convey much real information or meaning.
- **Vague attributions:** Vague phrases like “officials say,” “analysts say,” and “critics say” suggest sloppy reporting. Editors should push reporters and producers to be as specific as possible.
- **Also beware of jargon or overcomplexity.** Part of our job is to make the complex clear. Falling back on technical language might be a sign that we don’t yet understand something well enough to distill it clearly for our audience.

## **Excellence in news judgment**

Some things are givens:

- NPR will be on top of the news. We make sure our listeners and online users have the latest information.
- NPR will break news. We take great pride in telling people things they don’t know.
- NPR will explain events. Listeners and online users will come away understanding what’s happening and why.
- NPR will choose stories and tell them in ways that surprise and delight.

Those are among the factors that drive our thinking about the stories we do and don’t cover.

## **OUR STORY SELECTION REFLECTS THE MANY ASPECTS OF OUR MISSION.**

Recall NPR’s mission: “to create a more informed public, one challenged and invigorated by a deeper understanding and appreciation of events, ideas and cultures.”

As an NPR editor once wrote, “Our decisions about what to cover will be made with intelligence and imagination, seeking coherence and meaning amidst the jumble of events.”

Whether producing a show or a home page, a radio segment or a video story, we distinguish our journalism by striving to reflect the full spectrum of world events and human affairs, not just a single facet.

# Putting Principles Into Practice

We will fulfill the high standard we owe the public if we hold true to our principles. Doing so requires that we embrace complexity and continually think through difficult decisions. While these principles reinforce each other, they also are often in tension. In all situations, we balance them against one another, striving to honor our mission.

This statement is intended not only to serve as a guide, but also to provoke ongoing discussion and deliberation - the keys to any ethical decision-making process. It should both test and strengthen the moral compass that guides each of us in our work. It aims to foster a culture that compels and empowers us to exercise our consciences each day. We believe it is our shared responsibility to live up to these principles.

## How the handbook applies to you

The single best safeguard of NPR's integrity is the ethical foundation that each of our journalists brings to his or her work. NPR has a Standards and Practices Editor, but no individual can stand guard over all the decisions made by every journalist at NPR. The Standards and Practices Editor is a resource, just as this handbook is a resource. Resources are only valuable if they are used. Anytime an ethical question arises in your mind, consult the handbook and talk with your supervisor. Everybody at NPR is encouraged to write to [Ethics](#) to pose a question or seek guidance on making a difficult decision.

### **LIVING THESE GUIDELINES.**

This handbook is intended to frame your decisions in ways that help you do better journalism. It is not primarily a rulebook or a punitive tool. There are several instances throughout this book, however, where clear guidelines have been laid out on how NPR journalists should conduct themselves. We expect our journalists to know these guidelines and to abide by them.

Occasions will inevitably arise where an NPR journalist's actions may conflict with the guidelines expressed in these pages. These situations will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, and we will not pre-judge the outcome of those evaluations. Minor instances that supervisors deem as posing no significant threat to the credibility of our work may elicit no more than a conversation. Situations that may significantly undermine our journalism will be subject to a consistent review process, led by the Senior Vice President for News along with the Standards and Practices Editor and the appropriate members of the news management team. Our goal will be to identify in a timely, thoughtful and consistent manner the nature of the potential harm to our



journalism and to recommend an appropriate response to mitigate that harm. If disciplinary action is called for, Human Resources and Legal will be consulted.

## **How the handbook will evolve**

We rely on the contributions of every NPR journalist to ensure this handbook remains current and relevant to the situations you face each day. If you encounter decisions for which you feel the guidance in this book is inadequate, have questions about interpreting what you read here, or suggestions for how to improve the handbook, we encourage you to send a note to Ethics.

Twice a year, the Standards and Practices Editor will convene an ethics advisory group to consider all suggestions, review the Handbook, and make any additions or revisions necessary.

If any changes or additions are made, the revised handbook will be sent to staff with an accompanying memo outlining changes. Sessions will be scheduled at that time to give the staff the opportunity to review and discuss the revisions.

## Acknowledgments

This version of NPR's ethics handbook draws on the insights and experiences of countless NPR journalists. Thanks to all the reporters, producers, editors and others from throughout the organization who generously contributed time, thoughts, questions and case studies. Thanks also to the many NPR news managers whose guidance over the years is reflected in these pages, including Bruce Drake, John Dinges, Jay Kernis and Ellen Weiss. And of course, this document would not exist without the support and direction of Vivian Schiller, Joyce Slocum, Gary Knell and NPR's Board of Directors.

A council of individuals from throughout NPR was instrumental in the composition of this handbook, including Stu Seidel, Jonathan Kern and Ashley Messenger. The work that went into this effort could not have come together without the coordination of Molly Hart. The words you see throughout this book were written by many different authors, but its structure and content were created and compiled principally by Mark Memmott and Matt Thompson. Finally, this project owes an extraordinary debt to the leadership of Margaret Low Smith, NPR's Acting Vice President for News, and Bob Steele, Director of the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.