Code of Ethics for Broadcast Journalists:

Ethical Standards and how to Resolve Ethical Problems

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Personal Journalism Code of Ethics

**Preamble**

As journalists, it is our duty to educate the public. For hundreds of years, journalists have served as watchdogs for government. This role throughout history has played an important role in keeping politicians honest and more importantly, educating the electorate, who is the most important part of our representative democracy. As an aspiring journalist, this Code of Ethics is a personal one that I encourage others to willingly adopt. It is meant to serve as a reminder of the ideals that journalists should aspire to, and inspire us to remember that we are educators and have a power to make an enormous difference within our society and government.

**Values**

*Public Duty*

When Congress agreed to let David Sarnoff and William Paley use taxpayers’ airwaves, they also required there to be one hour of informational broadcasting a night. This eventually became the evening news. While this was a good plan and trade-off at the time, Congress did not anticipate the importance that advertisers would play in television and in the evening news. It’s no secret that advertising dollars are connected to ratings, and that many times content drives these ratings so that networks can charge more for advertisements.

For all journalists, the number one goal should be to educate the public; in particular, give the public the information they need about the current and future state of the country so they are educated on the issues when they enter voting booths across America. The most important aspect of a democracy is an electorate that understands the major issues at stake every time they vote.

I plan on keeping this in mind as I produce stories and pitch stories to report on. We as journalists have to set the standard rather than follow sensationalized news, which has become all too common. Without reporters fulfilling our watchdog role, the public is left to fend for themselves. As a result, misinformation runs rampant. Entertainment stories may bump ratings, but they do not help us serve our number one goal. Ethically, our duty to the public is more important than our duty to advertisers. We work for the public and they deserve news.

*Minimize Harm*

I will make it a priority to protect my sources, subjects, and victims involved in the various stories I work on throughout my future career. It is important to stress the necessity of working out these particular ethical issues on a case-by-case basis, but there are some general guidelines that can help in determining these certain ethical cases. Victims under the age of 18 will not be identified by name except in extreme cases, (i.e. breaking national news) and neither will juveniles who allegedly commit a crime. When it comes to sources, I will work to gain and keep their trust. If they say something is off the record and I agree to those terms, information must remain off the record. I will not try and bend the rules to get a story if it involves hurting a source or being insensitive to a victim. If myself or any other journalist does not protect one source, we would lose credibility with all sources. If we gain negative reputations with sources, subjects will be hesitant to discuss stories for fear of what we will publish or broadcast.

*Truth and Accuracy*

In the world of the 24-hour news cycle, there seems to have been a shift in values. Suddenly getting the news out first became more important than getting it right. I aim to fervently work against this change, understanding that while social media can be a great tool, it can also be a reporter’s greatest downfall. My number one goal should be to get the facts right for the viewers. If I repeatedly make mistakes, I will lose the trust of my audience. If trust is lost, my job becomes pointless. In order to avoid media disasters like the reporting after Sandy Hook, I must remember that everything I do, say, or type has to be accurate. Yes, sometimes I will be beaten to a story, but it is better to be second and right than first and wrong.

*Conflicts of Interest*

As journalists and broadcasters it is important to remain credible and unbiased. Conflicts of interest should be avoided at all costs in order to not damage my reporting. Because of this, it is never acceptable to accept gifts or favors in any form given strictly because of my status as a journalist. This is especially true when it concerns a source. I want to be viewed as professional as possible, so avoiding these types of conflicts are incredibly important in order to ensure that my stories are deemed credible by my superiors, colleagues and audiences.

*Accountability*

It is important in any profession to accept responsibility for your actions and admit mistakes or shortcomings. It is more important for journalists in order to ensure that we keep the trust of our viewers and readers. If I make a mistake, I will apologize and admit the mistake and offer an explanation as to why it occurred. As stated in the Code of Ethics for the Society of Professional Journalists, I will aspire to work towards the following: “Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct; encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media; admit mistakes and correct them promptly; expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media; abide by the same high standards to which they hold others” (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996, para 9). In striving to remain accountable, I will also hold those around me accountable in order to raise the reputation of journalists and the news organization where I work. As a result of setting an example through my own work, I hope to improve the work of those around me.

*Maintain Professional Reputation*

It is important to maintain your reputation in every aspect of life, and social media is no exception. I understand that social media can be my best friend or worst enemy as a journalist. Every tweet I send should be as professional as possible. I will not engage in petty arguments on Facebook or Twitter and I will always remember the most important rule for journalists working with social media, “you’re only one tweet away from being fired” (Ladurantaye, 2013, para. 4). Social media does, however, have numerous benefits and can be used to help with promoting stories. It is important to actively engage with viewers on social media, because I never know where I will find a story. It is not necessary to engage with everyone on social media, but if I have a good interactive presence, viewers will tend to care more.

**Current Ethical Dilemmas Facing Broadcasts Journalists**

Arguably journalists as a whole face more ethical dilemmas now than ever. One of the biggest ethical dilemmas is choosing between different loyalties within the profession. Should you first consider your station? Your audience? Your sources? Your advertisers? For many stories there are conflicting values that must be addressed by every reporter and journalist. When it comes to determining which loyalties should take precedent, everyone has different views. Pragmatically, it is hard to pick just one main loyalty, but in a perfect world a journalist’s main loyalty should lie with his or her audience. Journalism is a work of public service, and as a result, journalists’ loyalty should be to the public.

Credibility and a public distrust of media is something that all journalists face today.

Two current examples of this are the cases of Jayson Blair and Rick Bragg. Blair plagiarized stories for *The New York Times* and Rick Bragg lied about his use of stringers and interns in his writings. When incidents like this occur, it makes the public distrust stories the media puts out and question all of the stories they read or watch. In recent breaking news events there have also been many mistakes, like after the Sandy Hook School shooting and the Boston Marathon bombing. In response to the 24-hour news cycle, reporting has gotten sloppy in the sense that many times, reporters try to get information out as quickly as possible. In this process information is not confirmed and false information reaches the public. When reporters continuously make these kinds of mistakes they further lose credibility and the trust of the audience.

While journalists must struggle with the 24-hour news cycle, they must now also struggle with the government and other institutions attempting to define journalism. Recently, the Senate passed a bill saying who has the legal protections of a journalist, and “The protections would apply to a ‘covered journalist,’ defined as an employee, independent contractor or agent of an entity that disseminates news or information. The individual would have to have been employed for one year within the last 20 or three months within the last five years” (*Associated Press,* 2013, para. 11-12). This protection would also be extended to student journalists and those with a decent amount of freelance work in the last five years. Ultimately, a federal judge has the discretion in deciding who is covered. The law does draw the line at bloggers and therefore rules out citizen journalists for protection. The problem with this is if journalists are supposed to serve as a watchdog for the government, it seems that the government has an unfair advantage in deciding who can report and legally be protected. In the future, could it now be possible to further limit the definition of journalists until the media is controlled by the government entirely? If this were to happen, reporting would be compromised, biased, and there would no longer be a Fourth Estate.

A final ethical problem facing all journalists today is the evolution of social media and exactly how reporters and news outlets should use this relatively new asset. The issues of this are seen prominently in case study 4-C that deals with Twitter ethics for journalists. In January of 2009 the editor-in-chief of Reuters, David Schlesinger, began an experiment at a World Economic Forum. He and other journalists began to post behind the scenes info and break stories using Twitter and various hashtags. At Davos, an important economic summit, Schlesinger and others tweeted about George Soros, one of the top financers in the world. News about Soros could potentially have an immediate effect on the market because of his influence. Reuters then broke the news from Schlesinger’s personal tweets, meaning that Reuters “scooped itself” (Patterson & Wilkins, 2013, 96). Schlesinger was then asked if he would have fired a reporter for breaking the news before Reuters had the chance. He responded by saying that Twitter is a journalistic tool and that while it has the potential to be dangerous, it can be a huge asset to storytellers and that it definitely will change our standards. He stressed the importance of paying close attention to stories and says that Twitter could change our ethical standards. Along with this conflict between journalists and their news organizations, there is also the conflict between social networking and journalism itself when it comes to professionalism and ethical behavior on Twitter. The case recounts a *National Report* reporter going on an expletive-ridden Twitter tirade against a marketing professional that lead to the publication having to apologize for his conduct. Twitter and other various forms of social media are relatively new, and it will take time for news outlets to develop guidelines and codes for proper and professional use of social media.

**Application**

It is important to understand that the guidelines and values incorporated into this code of ethics are meant to serve as a guideline. As reporters, we do not know where our work will lead us on a day-to-day basis. These virtues are meant to serve as the ultimate ideal that we should strive for. We will not always be perfect, but our attempts and effort are what will matter most. It is not meant to be a strict set of hard and fast rules, but rather a suggestive guideline that should encourage and inspire employees to achieve and make a difference in the world. By nature, journalism gives those who chose to pursue it a certain amount of power. It is my job to not only use that power responsibly, but use it to create the most good.

With that being said, I will make it my goal to seek out news stories that will inform the public. I should work to be the standard, not just do what everyone else is doing. Just because everyone else is covering a story doesn’t make it right, or mean that I should cover it or actively pursue it. News and informing the public is my number one goal, and that is the standard I should work towards when finding stories.

One of the most important philosophers we can take into account here is Mill and his utilitarian ethics. Under this philosophy, Mill argues that we must do the greatest good for the greatest number of people. In the case of journalists, this means what can we do to most improve our audience. When we properly inform our audience, they become more educated and knowledgeable on particular issues. When the masses become more informed it leads to a better government and society for everyone. An example of a current ethical dilemma where utilitarianism could be used by a journalist is the Anthony Weiner scandal. Weiner became a high profile politician after he accidentally leaked nude photos of himself back in 2010, and again came into the spotlight in 2013 during his mayoral campaign for New York City when his extramarital affairs became public knowledge. Nearly every news outlet reported on it, however, if we look at the situation using Mill’s philosophy this reporting was unethical. To post a utilitarian story reporters should have concentrated on Weiner’s politics and policies rather than his “sexting.” Also, Anthony Weiner’s politics only affect a relatively small number of people, particularly only those who live in New York City. Based on that, this scandal should not have become national news because it served an entertainment purpose rather than giving people necessary information to help them understand Weiner’s politics. While utilitarianism says that you should do the most good for the most people, it is not a perfect philosophy. It should be noted that there are problems with the utilitarian style of thinking because it is impossible to predict every outcome of a particular action and this is why it is highly criticized.

Another philosopher to take into account is Kant and his categorical imperative. This stresses that we must act as if our actions were to become universal law and we must not use people as a means to an end. Kant also discusses duties, saying that an action is morally justified “only if it [springs] from duty- psychological motivation [is] irrelevant” (Patterson & Wilkins, 2013, 10). There are both strict and meritorious duties. The strict duties are negative, like “do not murder” while the meritorious duties are positive, such as “aiding others.” An example of an ethical dilemma where journalists should consider Kant is in dealing with advertisers. It is important that we do not work strictly for the advertisers and for the purpose to make money, because if we do that the point of our profession is non-existent. We cannot have sensationalized stories as a way to get more ratings strictly for advertisers, because that is using our audience as a means to an end, and that makes our actions unethical. Furthermore, if our actions became universal law, journalism would cease to exist as we know it and would instead become strictly a tool for advertisers.

In the event that I come across an ethical dilemma in my work, I will try to discuss it with my colleagues and superiors before acting. If it is a split second decision, I will try to remember that as a journalist I should be doing the most good for the greatest amount of people and I should not use my audience as a means to meet superficial or short-term goals.

**Revision**

Journalism is a profession that is constantly changing and developing along with technology. As a result I believe it is important to revisit this code of ethics twice a year, or at the end of every six months. It is important that this personal code of ethics is timely, because timeliness is one of the core values of journalism. If the code is not timely, there may be ethical dilemmas that arise that we will struggle to resolve because of new technologies. A revision of this code of ethics is especially important to help me maintain my credibility and reputation in the future.

**Conclusion**

This code of ethics is a personal one that is voluntarily embraced. I would encourage other aspiring journalists to consider these values and adopt the belief that the number one goal of any journalist should be to serve the public. Public duty, minimizing harm, truth, accuracy, avoiding conflicts of interest, accountability and reputation are all incredibly important values that will make it easier for journalists to accurately and efficiently educate the public. Journalists must face new problems and ethical dilemmas everyday, but if this number one goal is kept in mind, it will make facing other ethical dilemmas easier.

Works Cited

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Cover Memo Draft #3

When it comes to the third draft of my code of my code of ethics, I only had to make minor changes, as my second draft was pretty complete from the start. For my peer review, Maura said my basic sections were well explained and well written, so I didn’t really have to alter them that much. My subheadings were there, but she told me to get rid of the numbers that I had in front of the values, which I fixed.

My citations seemed correct, but she fixed my running head and make it all caps. She did a good job of correcting my grammar throughout as far as commas go. There were some issues with run on sentences and passive voice that she pointed out to me and I was able to fix as a result.

She said each value and dilemma was well explained and that I used many specific examples to illustrate my point well, along with my understanding of the philosophers. Her review did a good job of helping me catch little mistakes and I believe I have corrected most, if not all of them, as a result.