

# Ethics policy

## for the Chattanooga Times Free Press

**N**othing is more sacred to us than the readers' trust in us to tell the truth, to be accurate, fair and impartial.

We must be free of conflicts of interest. We must avoid the perception of conflicts of interest. As journalists, we cannot simply use these standards as slogans; they must be a living truth evident in everything we say, do and print. Any failure, by any one of us, to follow these journalistic truths undermines the credibility of

our newspaper as an entity, of each of us as individuals and of our craft.

What follows is a guide — a way of helping you determine what you should do as you go about your job. It does not foresee every action or situation. It simply gives guidance along the way. Any time — every time — you find yourself wondering what is the correct thing to do, check this policy and talk to an editor.

Seek advice.

**“Seek truth and report it. Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.”**

— SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS

## Gathering the News

■ Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.

■ Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.

■ Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.

■ Always question sources' motives before the editor promises anonymity. Only the editor of the newspaper can grant such a status. Generally, we try to explain to readers why a source requested anonymity.

■ Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.

■ Never distort the con-

tent of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.

■ Do not practice undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information.

■ Examine our own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.

■ Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.

■ Support the open exchange of views, even views you find repugnant.

■ Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.

■ Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.

■ Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines be-

tween the two. Paid advertisements should be labeled and should not resemble news reports.

■ Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

■ Anything that is a matter of public record should be reportable in the newspaper or on our website.

■ Correct errors immediately, both in the newspaper and online. When correcting information online, note that the story has been changed and how and why.

■ Correct all mistakes, but never agree to a source's request to remove an article or photo in its entirety. All such requests will go to the newsroom Unpublishing Committee.

■ Do not share any internal Times Free Press information that is confidential and proprietary, including stories in the works (we don't want to tip off our competitors).

## Plagiarism

### IT'S A SIMPLE POLICY:

**DON'T.** If respecting the intellectual property of your fellow journalists isn't a strong enough reason to stop you from stealing their work, consider this: In the Google age, it can take just seconds to catch you stealing work.

Attribute all information taken from another news source. For example, "The Washington Post reported X, Y and Z." Don't simply state information you have not verified as fact, no matter how widely reported it is. Attribution takes only seconds.

**NOTE:** In preparing this document, we have borrowed frequently from the standards and practices of many other institutions and newspapers, including the Society of Professional Journalists, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Associated Press Managing Editors and The Poynter Institute.

# Statement of core values

*“To give the news impartially, without fear or favor.”*  
(Adolph Ochs, 1858-1935)

Impartiality means reporting, editing, and delivering the news honestly, fairly, objectively, and without personal opinion or bias.

Credibility is the greatest asset of any news medium, and impartiality is the greatest source of credibility.

To provide the most complete report, a news organization must not just cover the news, but uncover it. It must follow the story wherever it leads, regardless of any preconceived ideas on what might be most newsworthy.

The pursuit of truth is a noble goal of journalism. But the truth is not always apparent or known immediately. Journalists' roles are therefore not to determine what they believe at that time to be the truth and reveal only that to their readers, but rather to report as completely and impartially as possible all verifiable facts so that readers can, based on their own knowledge and experience, determine what they believe to be the truth.

When a newspaper delivers both news and opinions, the impartiality and credibility of the news organization can be questioned. To minimize this as much as possible there needs to be a sharp and clear distinction between news and opinion, both to those providing and consuming the news.

“A newspaper has five constituencies, including first its readers, then advertisers, then employees, then creditors, then shareholders. As long as the newspaper keeps those constituencies in that order, especially its readers first, all constituencies will be well served.” (Walter Hussman, 1906-1988)

— Walter Hussman, Jr.  
Publisher

## Paying our way

If the “public’s right to know” is truly the highest and only interest journalists at our newspaper strive to serve, then journalists must reject all gifts, services and food offered by sources or organizations in the community that are not available to the general public. The only exception is at sporting events; working press may consume food and drinks in areas set aside for journalists.

### NO FREEBIES

Otherwise, turning down free bags and meals should be obvious. Refusing complimentary rounds of golf during a course review or rejecting meals on the house during a restaurant review should be standard practice.

### PRIVATE CITIZENS

Things get more complicated, however, when private citizens offer gifts. Is it better to accept a cup of coffee from a source during an interview at her home and not appear rude or reject the coffee on the grounds of staying ethically neutral?

What about if during the course of covering a county commission meeting a cake is brought out to celebrate the retirement of a secretary?

Should a journalist automatically reject the cake because it is from a government official or should she eat a small piece along with everyone else at the meeting in honor of the secretary?

In these cases, perhaps the standard should be: If you can eat it standing up, feel free to accept it. Thus a cup of coffee, a glass of water or a small piece of cake would be acceptable — especially if rejecting the offer and being rude would strongly outweigh the ethical consequences of accepting the small offer. This policy, however, should not

**“Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public’s right to know.”**

— SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS

be stretched to the point of eating entire meals, claiming you can balance your plate on one hand and eat a steak dinner standing up.

### NONFOOD GIFTS

All other non-food gifts should be rejected if they are not directly related to performing your job. Thus, a free program from a play would be acceptable since the reviewer needs to know how to spell a name properly. A visor from a sports team would not be. If a company sends free gifts through the mail, the reporter should donate the items to the newsroom’s Neediest Cases sale.

### ITEMS FOR REVIEW/ SERVICES/TRAVEL

Free items such as books or CDs that are needed for story or reviewing purposes may be accepted for the purpose of writing the story/review and then submitted to charity.

The same rules apply to services and travel. Unless the hair salon is giving free pedicures to everyone, journalists should not accept free or reduced services. Journalists also should reject all discounts, such as Nike offering a discount to journalists for golf clubs.

There is no ethical reason for a writer to pay less for a driver than a lawyer or nurse or teacher.

## Relationships/disclosure/conflicts of interest

Numerous published ethics policies refer to staff connections, relationships and conflicts of interest. A number also cite disclosure, but relatively few offer insight into outside disclosure of potential conflicts.

News employees should avoid participating in any story from which you

or a close relative might benefit, or reasonably be perceived to benefit, either financially or otherwise. On disclosing conflicts of interest, managers may elect to disclose the conflict within the story rather than remove the reporter from it, provided the conflict is deemed to be very minor.

# Political activities

We support your voting privileges. However, because media companies are expected to be nonpartisan, the conduct of employees is subject to special scrutiny and criticism. News personnel (reporters, copy editors, writers, photographers, editors, web producers) must refrain from participating in active partisan politics.

## ACTIVE PARTISAN POLITICS INCLUDE

- Active support of candidates for public office.
- Service as a delegate to political conventions, as a member of party commit-

tees, or candidates' committees.

- Signing of endorsements of candidates.
- Serving as a candidate for public office.
- Endorsing, recommending or participating in any organization whose primary purpose is to advance a politically sensitive cause.
- Donating to any candidate or public issue up for a vote.
- News employees may not seek elected office or serve in a leadership capacity with any political party (i.e., Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians). This rule also

applies to local political party groups (for example, the Hamilton County Republican Party) or affiliated organizations (Young Republicans, Young Democrats, etc.).

- Employees should not display yard signs, bumper stickers or wear buttons or clothing in support of any candidate, federal, state or local. Employees should not post partisan political comments on social media or comments that can be perceived as having a bias related to issues about which the newspaper publishes stories. This includes state, local and federal issues.

■ Likewise, employees should not work in the campaign of any candidate or carry or sign petitions in support of any cause. Because of the potential appearance of impropriety, employees should use care when donating to any group that might be perceived as political or when attending any rally or event with political overtones.

■ No employee is permitted to actively solicit votes for any political candidate at any time.

■ Likewise, stay away from being involved in religious lobbying organizations.

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# Membership in civic organizations/connections

**Journalists can be an active part of their community, but we should be aware of some pitfalls. We are asked to remain neutral on community issues, but the community is our home, and we can't help but have our opinions. We should declare any conflicts that arise.**

■ A Rotary club member should not cover the meeting. And don't accept the post of publicity chairman in the club.

■ Be careful about joining organizations, especially if it is related to your beat. Someone who covers theater, for example, should not be a member of a local theater, no matter how much he or she wants to be on stage.

■ Don't take a stand on issues in the area you cover. Don't cover stories where you have a personal conflict. For example, don't report on a controversy in the church in which you belong.

■ Let common sense guide you when petitions come your way — don't sign them.

■ Don't make donations to fundraisers with hot agendas or political parties. Working with a nonprofit group such as Goodwill is fine, but remember to exclude yourself from any

capacity that has to do with writing, layout or placement of that story on a page.

■ Don't purchase stock in a local company, especially if you are a financial reporter or editor, or a company you may have to cover if a controversy arises.

■ Don't exploit your connection to the newspaper by using threats, for example, to resolve a utility billing error or get better concert seats. Don't look for another job while on the clock. If offered a job by the city, school or another business, the reporter should let an editor know.

■ Be careful what you say in public and even out in the main newsroom about an organization, a political candidate or even a reader who may be a constant caller.

■ Members of the public or even staff from other departments might walk through at the time we are venting about a particular source.

■ Also, keep in mind to be careful about the signs, calendars or pictures around our desks. Members of the public pass through our newsroom, and we don't want to send the message that we may be biased. Even staff from other departments can overhear us venting. Go in an office and vent away.

■ Even during off hours, journalists should be careful about the message they send to the public. Wearing a T-shirt poking fun at a community controversy or even a bumper sticker taking a stand on an issue can send a wrong message.

■ A good idea is to stop and think twice. Stand back and look at what you are about to do, wear and say. Ask yourself: Will this tarnish the credibility of the newspaper? The same goes for social media posts.

■ Most answers are common sense; if not, just ask

your co-workers. Get a consensus, ask your editor and don't let something come back to haunt you. Once lost, it's very difficult to regain readers' trust or restore credibility to the newspaper.

## BE A LEADER

Jill Geisler, leadership management leader at The Poynter Institute, offers this:

"Think about your newsroom's email exchanges or your offhand conversations about people and subjects you cover. What's the tone? Is there sniping? ... Smart-aleck comments? Nonstop cynicism? Think again: What impression might someone take away from that reading? Would this kind of transparency reveal the perception or reality of bias? Or might it broadcast your journalistic professionalism to even the most skeptical eye? You, as the leader, walk and talk your newsroom's values."

# Connections and relationships

**News employees are encouraged to participate in the community through volunteer work, membership in civic organizations and the like. However, working in the community carries the potential of conflict of interest, or more to the point, the appearance of conflict of interest.**

■ No newsroom employee will be assigned to write a story, take photographs, edit material, write a headline, design a page or make news judgments related to an organization he or she may belong to or actively participate in, nor should he or she accept such an assignment. The exception may be made if a) the story/photo/page is deemed purely informational and entirely uncontroversial by the editor or two other senior editors; b) if the relationship between the employee and the organization is transitory; or c) emergency circumstances require temporary suspension (see disclosure of potential conflicts of interests).

■ No newsroom employee will take a leadership role in any organization about which he or she potentially may be pressed to make an editorial judgment.

■ No newsroom employee will perform public relations duties for any organization.

■ Any news staff member who has a close relative, close friend or someone with whom he or

she has a romantic involvement who is either running for office or working on a campaign will not be assigned to cover the story.

■ No newsroom employee will be assigned to write, photograph, report, edit material or make news judgments related to an organization, company or individual with which he or she has a direct financial relationship, nor should he or she accept such an assignment. A direct financial relationship would include employment, whether full time, part time, contract, freelance or other; and direct investment of stocks.

■ No employee should directly invest in any corporation, company or entity that he or she covers or is likely to cover, and no employee should be assigned to cover any corporation, company or entity that he or she has directly invested in. "Directly invest" should be taken to mean the intentional investment in a specific company, not investment in a mutual fund. Specifically exempted from this rule is coverage of the Chattanooga

Times Free Press and its properties, regardless of investment.

■ Newsroom employees will disclose any and all outside employment, regardless of status (full time, part time, contract, freelance or other) to the editor.

■ No newsroom employee will perform work for a direct competitor.

■ Newsroom employees should not be assigned to write, photograph, report or edit material or make news judgments about friends or family members or about any organizations that those friends and family members are active in, nor should employees accept such an assignment.

■ Should an employee's family member decide to undertake a course that could lead to a real or perceived conflict, the employee will immediately bring it to the attention of his or her supervisor. Examples would include the spouse's intention to run for office or accept a position that could pose a conflict, post a political sign, etc.

# Photography

Alteration of photographs is unacceptable. However, minor dodging and burning or color correction of areas in the photograph that do not change the content are acceptable. Correction or removing of dirt or dust spots may be done. Adding or removing elements that do not realistically represent what the camera captured is forbidden.

## APPROPRIATE SUBJECT MATTER

On occasion, the subject matter of a photograph may require discussion, for example, photographs with the potential to offend community standards through the inclusion of nudity, obscene gestures or offensive cultural elements. Photographs that may offend community standards include gruesome or emotionally distressing photographs.

## LABELING

A photograph that has been manipulated (electronically or otherwise) must be labeled as a photo illustration (meaning the photo was set up) or as an electronically manipulated photo (example: removing or creating elements in the illustration).

Overall, the photographer should be accurate and comprehensive in the representation of subjects, and should not intentionally contribute to or seek to alter or influence events that are being photographed.

Photographs should not be staged.

# Potential conflicts of interest

If a newsroom employee feels uncomfortable about a potential conflict situation involving either that employee or another, he or she should inform the editor privately about those concerns.

The editor will be the arbiter of whether a situation poses the risk of appearing to the general public to be a conflict of interest.

Should circumstances force the temporary suspension of a portion of this policy with the permission of the editor — such as only one reporter, photographer or editor being available for a breaking news event — the newspaper will include a disclaimer as an editor's note at the end of the story: In the interest of full disclosure, we note that reporter Jane Doe is a member of

The Goose Pimple Junction Quilting Guild.

In the event of a major suspension of the policy, reflecting a greater concern that a conflict of interest may be seen by the public, the editor may decide to a) place the editor's note at or near the beginning of the story; or b) write a longer explanation of the situation to use as a news drop-in.

■ All newsroom employees are expected to disclose potential conflicts to his/her supervisor and the newspaper's editor.

■ In the event of a potential non-newsroom conflict of interest, an editor's note will be published or a paragraph inserted in the story explaining the situation and the potential conflict. An example would be if the

**“You, as the leader, walk and talk your newsroom's values.”**

— JILL GEISLER, POYNTER INSTITUTE ON LEADERSHIP MANAGEMENT

Goose Pimple Junction Exponent were sold to Gannett after a major bidding battle with WEHCO Media. Any story about that sale should include a paragraph or an editor's note that WEHCO was also involved in negotiations for the purchase of the Goose Pimple Junction Exponent.

■ Staff members should not write about, photograph, illustrate or make news judgments about family members, friends or close associates. Columns or a writer's story being told in the first person would be obvious exceptions.

■ Staff members should notify his/her supervisor about friendships or relationships that could be a conflict of interest. The intent is not to limit an employee's personal life but to resolve potential conflicts.

When in doubt and whenever situations arise, consult with your supervisor.

In summary, we are to put ethics on the same plane as accuracy and fairness. If you have any doubts over whether an action blurs the lines of ethics, then see the editor.

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## Social media

Almost all of the elements of the social media section simply transfer elements of the newsroom ethics policy to online social media formats. But since social media is such a huge presence in our work and personal lives, the guidelines bear repeating:

■ Stop and think twice about what you are about to say. Ask yourself: Will this tarnish the credibility of the newspaper or your credibility with sources and readers?

■ Think about what impression someone might take away from your electronic exchanges. Would they reveal the perception or

reality of a bias?

■ Refrain from participating in partisan politics.

■ Do not publicly support any candidate in federal, state or local political races.

■ Do not actively solicit votes for any political candidate at any time.

■ Even when using personal social media sites, be careful not to post political opinions or even strong opinions on anything that could affect your credibility as a journalist.

■ Be honest and fair. A good rule of thumb is to never post anything you would not want your mother to see. Consider whether you would

be comfortable with The New York Times publishing your comment and attributing it to you.

■ Be aware of your association with the TFP in online social networks. If you identify yourself as a TFP staff member, ensure that your profile and related content are consistent with how you wish to present yourself with colleagues, readers and those we cover.

■ Don't use ethnic slurs, personal insults or obscenity, or engage in any conduct that would not be acceptable in the TFP workplace. You should also show proper consideration for others' pri-

vacy and for topics that may be considered objectionable or inflammatory, such as politics and religion.

■ Refrain from posting comments or links related to advocacy or a special interest regarding topics you cover or issues the newspaper covers.

■ Remember that what you do on social media should be presumed to be publicly available to anyone. Even if you have created a private account and used privacy settings, it's easy for someone to copy and paste your information or take a screenshot and make it public.

- I, the undersigned, have read, understand and will adhere to the Chattanooga Times Free Press Ethics Policy.

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**Signature**

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**Date**