Nebraska Journalism Trust

Policy 6: Ethics Policy

The Nebraska Journalism Trust is in the business of truth. We seek it, we record it and we present it to the public so that our state — our community — can better understand itself. In this way, we believe we can contribute to a more vibrant, informed and whole Nebraska.

For this to work, our journalists must tell the truth without any other agenda, and readers must be able to trust that they do. Any lapse in ethics by our journalists, or any reason readers have to doubt our motives, creates a mistrust that undermines our mission.

We promise readers that our journalists always seek the truth earnestly and with integrity, independence, compassion and accountability. This code of ethics outlines specific ways that our journalists strive to keep that promise. If we ever stray from it, readers should call us out and demand we make amends.

It is important to remember that journalists are human and carry with them their own life experiences. Our journalists are also members of their communities. It is not practical — nor desired — for our journalists to be coldly detached from the issues they cover.

But our journalists will avoid as much as possible conflicts of interest and situations that raise doubts about their integrity. If a topic cannot be covered fairly — for example, if a reporter or editor's spouse has a contractual relationship with a subject — they should recuse themselves from involvement with the piece. When these conflicts are unavoidable, our journalists must disclose them to their colleagues and to our readers. This includes in stories, when appropriate.

When in doubt, we are transparent. When we make a mistake, we are humble, admit our error and correct it. While truth may be our business, the trust of our readers is our most valuable asset. We aim every day to work on behalf of Nebraskans, to earn their trust and to bring their truths to light.

Donors and board members

Donors are supporting our mission of doing insightful and incisive journalism on Nebraska issues. They are not buying any special consideration we would not afford other sources. Board members, by the same token, have incredible responsibility over the governance and organization of the Nebraska Journalism Trust. While we're grateful for these two important roles, we must take measures to insulate the journalism from our business operations, in much the same way legacy news organizations have long kept a firewall between similar roles.

With this in mind:

- We will not show stories to donors or board members prior to publication.
- Board members and institutional donors should not pitch story ideas to editorial staff. The first contact for journalistic discussions should be the executive director, not an editor or staff member. If staff is approached by a board member or institutional donor, they should direct the conversation to the executive director.

- NJT stories will disclose relationships with board members or major donors (above $5,000 in a year) in any stories that involve those subjects.

Truthfulness in storytelling

Our journalists may use literary-style storytelling techniques in news articles or videos when appropriate. However, the use of those techniques does not entitle journalists to change facts, alter timelines, leave out important information or otherwise take artistic liberties to place the narrative of the story above the truth of the story.

Our journalists are not allowed to invent or create composite characters or scenes in reporting the news. The use of pseudonyms is also not allowed. Instead, when using the common name of the subject of a story is not possible, our journalists should try to find another version of that subject's name to use — such as a middle name, a nickname or a first initial — and be transparent with readers about the choice.

Paying for information

We do not pay sources for information or for interviews, and we do not pay subjects to shoot photos or video of them.

If someone witnesses an event and provides us with an extraordinary photo or video, it is acceptable to pay them for their work upon request, as we would pay a freelance journalist.

We also might buy a source a cup of coffee or lunch as part of an interview. And we pay fees for public records when required. But such small considerations should never be manipulated or held out as leverage in exchange for information.

Undercover reporting and misrepresentation

We don't wear disguises, make up fake names, pretend to be who we are not or mislead people for information. When reporting stories, we identify ourselves when asked. When approaching someone for an interview, we identify ourselves at the outset and make clear how we will use the information they provide.

At the same time, we are also members of the community. Any information available to the general public is fair game for us to report, even if we obtained it in a forum where we didn't proactively identify ourselves as journalists.

Anonymous sources

We avoid quoting anonymous sources. There may be rare exceptions when the news value of a quote from an unnamed source outweighs the lack of transparency that anonymity creates. In those instances, and only with the approval of an editor, an anonymous source may be quoted or cited.

When presenting information from an anonymous source, we include a reason why the source needs their name withheld. Greater value is placed on requests for anonymity from whistleblowers, people who are victims of crimes or trauma and people who would be in danger if their names were linked to their quotes. We want people to be able to talk about their lives and their experiences.

Children are a separate case. We weigh the long-term impacts of including a child's name in a story, and will err on the side of allowing children to go unnamed in hard news situations.

Always, but especially in stories about politics or government, we examine requests for anonymity for possible ulterior motives. We also do not grant government spokespeople anonymity in quotes when they are providing an official comment.

Any time an anonymous quote is used, the journalist reporting the story must know the true name of the source and how to contact them. The journalist must provide that information to an editor.

On/off the record

As journalists, we sometimes use terms in interviews that are unfamiliar to the general public. At The Nebraska Journalism Trust:

- "On the record" means that the information provided is able to be used, including in quotes, with the person's name attached as a source.
- "Not for attribution" means that the information can be published and can be used in quotes but not with the source's name attached to it. This has to comply with the rules for anonymous quotes.
- "On background" means that the information can be published as general contextual information, but it cannot be used in quotes and cannot have the source's name attached to it. When using such sourcing to describe events, we demand exhaustive due diligence to prove or disprove the source's story.
- "Off the record" means that the information provided cannot be published or used in quotes and cannot have the source's name attached to it.

Our journalists must explain these terms to sources and agree to them prior to the interview. More deference is given to people who don't often deal with the press. Official sources should be generally familiar with these concepts. A single comment said off the record or on background does not make the rest of the interview off limits. All interviews and information sent to The Trust are on the record unless agreed otherwise. Any request by a source — especially one who frequently interacts with the media — to retroactively place a comment off the record is viewed with extreme skepticism.

Corrections

Everyone makes mistakes. Despite our best efforts, some may occasionally sneak into a published piece. At The Trust, we work as hard as we can to prevent that, and we are tough on ourselves when we fail. But, while we know that some mistakes are bound to happen, we never take a lax approach to fixing them. Instead, we act quickly to right our wrongs, both small and big, because we understand that the responsibility of telling the truth comes with the equal responsibility of owning up when we mess up.

All claims of inaccuracy should be directed to an editor. If the information is provably, factually inaccurate, journalists must be able to explain what is wrong, how the mistake occurred and what the correction is.

Journalists must make sure the information in the proposed correction is accurate before inserting it into the article in lieu of the mistaken information. A correction notice must then be posted on the article stating how it was corrected. All corrections are filed and tracked. After the second correction in a year, the editor and reporter will meet and design a plan to minimize future corrections. If the pattern continues, further discipline, including termination, is on the table.

Significant factual corrections will be shared with our distribution partners. The decision of what constitutes “significant” lies with our editors.

Fact-checking

Every one of our journalists is responsible for thoroughly fact-checking their own work. While editors and other colleagues may serve as additional lines of defense against mistakes, it is the journalists who gather the information and produce the content who are primarily responsible for the accuracy of it.

During editing and other production processes, editors must take care not to insert mistakes into the content. When in doubt, editors should consult the journalists who produced the work to double-check information.

Every story will be double checked by the reporter, be they freelance or full-time employees, and the editor at a point before it is shared with media partners. That email notification to publication partners is the point at which we consider a piece “published.”

Retraction and take-down requests

In general, we do not grant requests to retract or take down news articles unless the article is so fundamentally and factually flawed that no correction or follow-up reporting could fix it and its continued presence online is causing active harm to public understanding or discourse.

If, after investigation, we determine that information contained in an article is inaccurate, our first move should be to correct it immediately and post a notice of that correction. If the article leaves out important follow-up details that occurred after the article’s publication — such as an article about an individual who was criminally charged but who had those charges dropped following the article’s publication — a follow-up story or a note posted to the original article may be appropriate.

Restorative practices

Sometimes, a journalist's error goes beyond an inadvertent mistake to something bigger. This could be insensitivity in news coverage, mistreatment of individuals in person or online, or other misbehavior in violation of this code. When that happens, we are committed to making things right.

This means we work immediately to respond to allegations of misconduct, and we investigate those allegations thoroughly. When appropriate, we reach out to affected individuals and talk with them on the phone or meet with them in person to listen to their thoughts about what we did wrong and how we can fix it.

We take their opinions seriously. And, when necessary, we punish journalists for their misbehavior.

Punishment

When journalists at the Trust make mistakes, an editor should talk with them about how the mistake happened and how to prevent it in the future.

Not every mistake requires a journalist to be harshly punished. Mistakes happen, and reporters should not live in fear of occasional, honest mistakes. Indeed, those are why this policy exists.

That said, editors and other newsroom leaders should be especially aware of patterns of conduct that create habitual or ongoing problems.

When appropriate in instances of major misconduct, the title should publish a story explaining a journalist's discipline, while also adhering to all personnel privacy rules and employment agreements by which it is bound.

Non-retaliation

No one — not Free Press journalists, not freelancers, not members of the public, and not sources — should be retaliated against or otherwise penalized for bringing forward concerns about inaccurate information or potential violations of this code. We welcome people's input to make us better.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is taking someone else's words and presenting them as your own. This can be as little as stealing a unique phrase or sentence or as large as cutting-and-pasting whole paragraphs. It is a cardinal sin in journalism, and anyone who commits plagiarism is subject to serious punishment — including possible termination.

If any reader spots what they believe to be plagiarism, we ask that they contact us as soon as possible. Any staff member who receives a complaint of plagiarism must take that complaint to an editor immediately, and editors must investigate reports of plagiarism promptly.

Fair use and citations

We're not here to steal anyone's work. If we learn details for a story exclusively from another news outlet, we first make an effort to verify that information ourselves, and when needed we cite that outlet, in the body of the story, as the source of that information and provide a link to the other outlet's article, if possible.

If we cannot verify information reported by another outlet — especially if that information is not something that the other outlet's journalist witnessed first-hand — we either do not report it or we attribute it to the publication and note that we were unable to confirm the information.

We also use links liberally to be transparent in where we obtained information. We link to academic studies, websites, data sources and elsewhere so our readers can follow our reporting trail.

Impartiality

At the heart of our relationship with readers is a promise that we, in reporting the news, have no agenda but to serve them. Our journalists must leave their personal views and opinions out of news articles and instead let only the facts guide them. We seek out, listen to and quote diverse voices. When applicable, we are transparent with facts about sources' personal or professional lives that may influence their views. (For instance, when quoting a source who works at a particular think tank for a political story, we should note that think tank's take on its core issues.)

While we maintain a journalist's valued skepticism — and we always seek second and third sources to verify information — we also do not automatically assume people are acting in bad faith. Our job is to help Nebraskans understand their state, and that includes exposing things that are outrageous and unjust. But we also seek to understand our sources and their motives so that we can give readers a clear, but nuanced, portrait of The Good Life.

As a publisher, our employees may not contribute, directly or indirectly, to political campaigns or to political parties or groups seeking to raise money for political campaigns or parties.

Employees can not participate in politics — including signing petitions, attending marches or rallies, displaying lawn signs, wearing campaign paraphernalia or displaying any other form of political partisanship.

Personnel may participate in issue-oriented activities, such as expressing support for human rights or denouncing discrimination because of a person's race, religion, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. For example, an employee could march in a Pride parade; however, it would not be permissible for an employee to participate in a rally supporting or organized by a political party. Be mindful that events can take on a partisan tone. Participation should not be inconsistent with this code.

Personnel should avoid any actions that could make a reasonable reader doubt our organization's ability to report fairly or with neutrality. This includes participating in groups or activities that advocate for a specific policy or political solution.

It is not our intention to dissuade employees from participating actively in or donating to civic, charitable, religious, public, social or residential organizations. Such activities are permitted, and even encouraged, to the extent that they:

- Do not detract from performance or effectiveness at work.
- Are, in the case of Board memberships, disclosed to an employee's direct supervisor.

- Do not, by their extensiveness, cause The Trust to subsidize or appear to subsidize the activity.
- Do not otherwise violate this code. In the event that a conflict arises or may arise between an outside organization with which an employee is affiliated and the interests of The Trust, the employee should refrain from participating in the conflicting or potentially conflicting activity.

In an era of growing politicization and increased scrutiny of journalists — not only of their work but also their social media activity and participation in civic life — it is more important than ever to consider the repercussions of actions in the public arena. Our employees are custodians of our reputation, and we have a duty to one another to prioritize that concern. While that means an employee does not have as much freedom to take part in certain groups or activities, it is balanced by the powerful and influential platform we have to expose abuses of power and betrayals of the public trust by government, business and other institutions. To repeat the overarching guidance: When in doubt, ask.

Business side employees should be mindful that their actions may reflect on The Trust and should not conflict with its core mission. As always, when in doubt, you can discuss with a supervisor.

Approved by the Board of Directors August 13th, 2024.