

# **Independence and Integrity II: The Updated Ethics Guide for Public Radio Journalism**

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# Independence and Integrity II: The Updated Ethics Guide for Public Radio Journalism

This guide provides an overview of some of the most important ethical issues that face public radio, as identified by public radio journalists. It offers principles and standards for ethical practice, in keeping with public radio's commitment to the highest standards of journalism. *Independence and Integrity II* was written and edited by Alan G. Stavitsky, University of Oregon, and Jeffrey Dvorkin, National Public Radio, with funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. It builds upon *Independence and Integrity: A Guidebook for Public Radio Journalism*. Follow the links below to read the ethics guide, supporting documents, and the original *Independence and Integrity* volume.

## The Updated Ethics Guide

- [Public Radio's Legacy of Independence and Integrity](#)
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## Supporting Documents

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- [List of Poynter Conference Participants](#)
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## References and Resources

- [Ethics codes, books, Web sites, publications](#)

See the original public radio ethics guide: [Independence and Integrity: A Guidebook for Public Radio Journalism](#), published in 1995.

## **A Message from Robert Coonrod, President, CPB**

Journalism depends on answering questions. As reporters and editors, you are focused on the traditional ones – the “who, what, where, when and why” questions that are the foundation of journalism. But your audiences have questions too. “How can I know I’m hearing the whole story?” “Are fact and opinion clearly identified?” “How can I trust what I hear?” As public radio journalists, you are accountable for those public questions as well.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting shares that accountability. As the steward of the federal contribution to public television and radio, CPB is specifically charged by Congress with protecting public broadcasting’s editorial independence, but also with ensuring its objectivity and balance. This guide is intended to help do both.

In funding development of *Independence and Integrity II: The Updated Ethics Guide for Public Radio Journalism* and its 1995 predecessor, [\*Independence and Integrity: A Guidebook for Public Radio Journalism\*](#), CPB had two goals. The first was to offer radio reporters and editors a useful tool. Given the on-the-spot, split-second decision-making that characterizes much of journalism, there is often not enough time for journalists to wrestle with the big issues as deeply or as thoughtfully as they would wish. This guidebook, however, offers the best thinking of many of your professional peers and provides a good basis for ethical judgments.

Beyond that, however, CPB wanted to deal with the important questions of public broadcasting’s independence, integrity and ethics. Public scrutiny of our work may feel uncomfortable, but accepting and learning from this criticism is a vital part of our mission. Our hallmark is high-quality, in-depth, multi-faceted journalism, and the public has a role to play in holding us to that standard.

## **A Message from Kevin Klose, President & CEO, NPR**

*Independence and Integrity II: The Updated Ethics Guide for Public Radio Journalism* aims to identify issues of ethical conduct in the daily practice of our specialty – non-commercial broadcast journalism – and to provide practical and useful guidance to reporters, editors, producers, and managers and executives in dealing with such matters should they arise.

Public confidence in the integrity of news media is anchored in the independence of the news media from the events, people, and organizations about which they report. News consumers are entitled to the assurance that there are no hidden financial, organizational, political, or other such ties between media and the objects and subjects of news coverage that could impair or extinguish the disinterest and independence that is essential for the fulfillment of the promise of the First Amendment. Public confidence relies not only on the public's perception of independence, but the actual daily practice of independence by reporters, editors, and producers who bring news to listeners and viewers.

It is broad in its scope and inclusive in its approach. It is more than a series of helpful suggestions because it is clear about the pitfalls and complexities that we confront on behalf of NPR's member stations and their listeners. It has done so by drawing on some of the best thinking in American journalism.

While it is aimed at public radio managers and journalists, the guide also is intended to be of use to public radio listeners with questions of their own about our accountability to the listeners we serve. The authors hope that listeners will not hesitate to use the guide for their own assessments of public radio's integrity and independence.

If this Ethics Guide is put on the shelf or kept in a drawer it may give us the illusion of virtue only because we know it is there. But its true usefulness will be found when this Ethics Guide is well thumbed, openly discussed, and frequently cited.

## PUBLIC RADIO'S LEGACY OF INDEPENDENCE AND INTEGRITY

Though educational institutions were among the earliest radio broadcasters, the sale of advertising quickly became the economic foundation of radio in the United States. Commercial stations, flush with mass-appeal entertainment programs from the powerful new national networks, dominated the airwaves by the end of radio's first decade, the 1920s. In the 1930s, however, a group of prominent educators – imbued with a belief in radio's ability to educate, inform and enrich – fought to keep noncommercial broadcasting alive. Their determined efforts persuaded the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to create a new classification of stations – *noncommercial educational*, to this day the legal description for public radio. The FCC reserved frequencies for such stations, first in the AM band (1938) and later between 88 and 92 megahertz in the FM band (1945), where most public radio stations are found today. (See [Current's timeline of public broadcasting history](#).)

Educational radio, as it was then known, was under-funded, often ignored by listeners, and lacked regular national programming. Without a system for connecting stations, educational broadcasters were limited to the so-called “bicycle network,” sharing programs by mailing tapes from station to station. Yet, even on the margins of American broadcasting, the values of the system began to emerge. One significant development was the founding of the [Pacifica chain of stations](#), beginning with KPFA in Berkeley, California, in 1949. Pacifica pioneered the idea of listener sponsorship, emphasized the airing of minority viewpoints, and relied upon community volunteers.

Public radio was vitalized by the federal support that came with the [Public Broadcasting Act of 1967](#). The semantic shift from *educational* to *public* broadcasting was significant, reflecting a vision that noncommercial radio and television should have broad appeal, beyond traditional educational uses, to encompass information, entertainment and human interest. The act created the [Corporation for Public Broadcasting \(CPB\)](#), an independent, private organization charged with distributing federal funds to stations, networks and producers; and generally fostering the development of the existing loose confederation of stations into a unified, interconnected public radio system.

Because of congressional concern over creating a government-controlled broadcasting system, CPB was forbidden from owning or operating stations, or producing programs. The intent was to

keep government out of broadcasting so politicians, especially the party in power, would not be able to use the airwaves for political advantage or to spread propaganda. CPB thus sponsored a series of meetings of public radio managers that led in 1970 to the founding of [National Public Radio](#) (NPR) to produce and distribute programs. Another major producer and distributor, [Public Radio International](#) (PRI) originally called American Public Radio, emerged in 1983. Many individual public radio stations and independent producers also offer programs to stations, either directly via satellite or through NPR and PRI.

Public broadcasting's founding legislation built in layers of insulation between government and broadcaster, generally referred to as a "firewall." CPB policy is set by a board of directors insulated from Congress because [board members are appointed by the president](#). And the president's influence is limited because CPB by-laws require the board to be bipartisan. However, the history of public broadcasting has taught us that, in practice, it's difficult to insulate broadcasting from politics.

Despite the care taken to balance independence and accountability in the founding legislation, some ambiguity remained. Congress charged CPB in the 1967 act with affording public broadcasters "maximum protection from extraneous interference and control." This is the corporation's so-called "heat shield" function.

At the same time, Congress included language in the act that requires the CPB "to facilitate...strict adherence to objectivity and balance in all programs or series of programs of a controversial nature." What's unclear is where the responsibility for assessing "objectivity and balance" rests: with the station, the CPB, the FCC, Congress, listeners? Further, the phrase "in all programs or series of programs" was ambiguous. Does this mean each program must be balanced within itself, or can balance be achieved across a series of programs?

So, on the one hand, the legislation called for public broadcasters to be free of external influence. On the other hand, "objectivity and balance" were mandated. While these are standards to which we as public radio journalists naturally aspire, this mandate nonetheless represents an editorial obligation that other journalists – whether in commercial broadcasting, in print or online -- do not face.

In the years since 1967, [support from corporations, foundations and listeners exceeded tax-based revenue for most stations](#). However, this raises parallel concerns about other forms of outside influence upon public radio journalism. And opportunities brought by digital convergence

– notably e-commerce – offer both promise and peril. Clearly we need fresh thinking about firewalls.

The formative laws and regulations for our field tell us what public radio is *not* (that is, commercial), rather than what it is or should be. It has been public broadcasters themselves who have defined the fundamental principle of public radio – to address listeners as citizens and individuals, not as consumers – and who have determined the practices to reach that end.

Working to develop ethical standards and to safeguard public radio's editorial independence, leading public radio journalists have engaged in two CPB-funded projects. Participants in the 1994 Conference for Public Radio Journalism at the [Poynter Institute](#) wrestled with how to ensure independence from politicians, funders, and, in some cases, their own licensees; how to protect local news coverage in an age of satellite-delivered fare; and how to make use of an intriguing then-new tool called the Internet, among other issues. [Independence and Integrity: A Guidebook for Public Radio Journalism](#), published in 1995, which resulted from that process, reflected their best thinking and provided a foundation for the current project.

In the spring of 2003, another group of journalists, managers and academics returned to Poynter to consider the issues facing the public radio system in the digital age (a list of participants is included in the appendix). Their imperative, however, remained the same: to discuss the problems facing public radio, consider solutions, and identify the ethical standards that should govern our journalism. *Independence and Integrity II* reflects their insight and deliberation, augmented by feedback from dozens of public radio professionals who attended sessions at system meetings and workshops at Minnesota Public Radio, Wisconsin Public Radio and KQED, San Francisco.

As Bill Siemering, one of public radio's seminal thinkers, wrote in the foreword to *Independence and Integrity*, "Independence and integrity are as essential to our work as operating with sterile instruments is for a surgeon." That belief pervades the discussion of standards that follows.

## FAIRNESS, ACCURACY AND BALANCE

The Public Broadcasting Act makes reference to “objectivity,” but we prefer to speak of the journalistic ideal in terms of fairness, accuracy and balance. Objectivity, as it has been traditionally defined, refers to the demand that journalists keep their personal biases, emotions and other “subjective” factors out of their reporting. This way, journalists provide citizens with the raw information people need to judge public affairs for themselves, and to make informed decisions about civic matters. Give the citizens enough news and points of view, so the theory goes, and they’ll find the truth.

Still, many journalists and journalism educators are uncomfortable with the baggage that the term “objectivity” carries. Objectivity as a “just the facts” journalistic style evolved as a reaction to the sensationalism of 19th century “Yellow Journalism” and as a result of commercial imperatives, such as a desire to attract advertisers across political lines and the need to share wire-service reports among newspapers of different political perspectives. But the tenets of objectivity came under scrutiny after World War II as journalists were criticized for often-unquestioning news coverage of major stories such as McCarthyism and Vietnam.

New movements of journalistic thought and practice emerged in the early 1970s – coincident with the early years of contemporary public radio. This “new journalism” stressed interpretive reporting, providing added depth and context to stories; investigative reporting; and narrative approaches, such as the sound-rich, scene-setting techniques that characterize public radio reports. Though some of the strains of the “new journalism” faded, notably advocacy journalism, elements of this approach influenced contemporary public radio journalism.

NPR uses the term “fact-based reporting.” Regardless of what you call it, reporting that is fair, accurate and balanced is true to the journalistic ideal. Such reporting filters out bias in the traditional spirit of objectivity, while allowing reporters to draw upon their personal insight and engagement with the stories they cover. It results in the healthy skepticism that marks the best of public radio journalism.

Read more about fairness, accuracy and balance in the original [\*Independence and Integrity\*](#).



“Everything that goes on the air, from the most straight-forward news voicer to the most elaborate news analysis, is anchored in the pursuit and description of facts – those verifiable bits of information that are the raw material of accurate communication.”

-- *Sound Reporting: The National Public Radio Guide to Radio Journalism and Production* (p.10)

### **Principles:**

1. Consider the fundamental values that underlie public radio journalism:
  - Journalists seek truth, both facts and context
  - Journalists serve their communities by connecting people with information they need to participate in civic life, and to guard against abuses of power
  - Public radio journalism aims to be impartial and independent; special care must be taken to ensure that those who seek to influence the news are not given special access
  - Journalists must act ethically, to serve their audiences' best interests

## What are the Core Values of Local News Programming in Public Radio?

Public Radio Program Directors Inc. (PRPD) and Walrus Research surveyed listeners to determine the "core values" for local news in public radio:

### Executive Summary: PRPD's Core Values of Local Programming (2001)

Copyright© 2002 by Public Radio Program Directors Inc.

- We found that many public radio listeners, especially those who are core to an NPR station, want a **comprehensive** range of news and information programming from their station-including local as well as national and international.
- We found a **widening opportunity** for public radio stations to serve listeners who are highly critical of local, commercial radio and TV news and talk shows they describe as shallow, sensational, loud and manipulative.
- Public radio listeners want local programming on their station to reflect **the same Core Values** as network programming. Most importantly, they want information in depth **so they can think** about large issues.
- Core public radio news listeners draw a clear line between local information they can get from other sources (such as local newspaper/wire service headlines) and coverage that gives them knowledge, understanding and makes them think.
- The word "**local**" is not particularly useful for producers and reporters seeking to understand what core listeners want in coverage about their communities. They reject local news that fails to present information in a context that allows them to "connect the dots", dismissing it as "merely local" or "parochial" (defined by the dictionary as "of narrow range, merely local, provincial, restricted.")
- Public radio listeners, especially those who use an NPR station as their primary choice view events in their communities as part of **an interconnected web of causal relationships**. They put a high value on in-depth local news programming that presents issues and ideas in context, asking and answering questions such as:

Has it happened before here?

Has it happened elsewhere?

Is it part of a pattern?

What is the cause?

What is the impact?

In their view, **no event is isolated on any level-local, national or international**. The most highly valued local news presentations integrates their experience as citizens of their communities, their nation and the world.

- **There is no advantage in local origination if the presentation is below network standards.**

2. Public radio journalists must respect the dignity and privacy of the people encountered in the course of covering the news. This is especially important when reporting on tragedy and trauma. ([See the British Broadcasting Company's standards on such reporting.](#))

### Providing Context

Some ways to help listeners make sense of the news include:

- providing information about the self-interests of sources, such as possible political or financial benefits
- providing so-called “truth squad” analyses of political ads and other claims, which assess their veracity
- “precision journalism,” which utilizes government and academic statistical data to present the sweep of a story

3. Journalistic fairness also extends to our listeners. We recognize their right to information that is as complete as possible, and we should present the news in a way that offers context and perspective. This includes providing information on how sources may have an interest in the outcome of an issue, and emphasizing when information cannot be confirmed.
4. Our journalism should be “transparent” and accountable – that is, we share with our listeners our policies and practices, and discuss how we resolve thorny ethical problems. (Our Web sites offer an opportunity to present material, and we

should use the airwaves to direct listeners to this information. As an example, see the [Public Radio Collaboration's Editorial Standards.](#))

5. Accuracy and reliability are at the heart of journalism, presenting information that's correct and in context. Our listeners deserve our best efforts to confirm and double-check. It's worth noting the distinction between information that is “verifiable” – that can be confirmed, witnessed, described by multiple, independent sources – and claims, conjecture, and opinion that are important to understanding the news but should always be secondary to the facts.
6. The very act of reporting a claim on public radio may confer upon it a sense of legitimacy. We should not broadcast information from untrustworthy sources; this entails believing that our source is in a position to know, understanding their motivation, and concluding that their information is of interest or value to our listeners.

## Editorial Decision-Making

1. What is the ethical problem? Carefully consider and define the problem at hand.
2. What organizational policies and professional standards apply? How do your station's guidelines and codes apply here?
3. What is the journalistic purpose?
4. Who else should be included in the decision-making process? Staff members, your news director, other colleagues?
5. Who are the stakeholders affected by my decision? If the roles were reversed, how would I feel as a stakeholder?
6. What alternatives are there?
7. Do I have to decide now?
8. Could I go on the air and justify this decision to my listeners?

-from *Independence and Integrity: A Guidebook for Public Radio Journalism* (p.40)

7. Public radio journalism should avoid oversimplification of stories, and attribute claims as specifically as possible (for example, "Senators X and Y claim" is better than "Democrats claim.")
8. While routine stories may occasionally be based on a single official source, significant or controversial stories should be based on more than one source.

## Evaluating Information

### Some questions to ask:

Does the source know enough about the issue to give you credible information?

Does the source have a vested interest in getting the story out?

Is there an independent source to call, someone without an interest in the story?

Do a variety of sources tell you the same thing?

9. Sources should be granted anonymity only in cases where our listeners' interest is served by presenting the information this way, and the information is unavailable in any other way. However, journalists should grant anonymity only after consulting with senior news managers, who should be told the identity of the source in question. Be aware that protection of sources is not always assured under state law; if in doubt, consult with legal counsel.
  
10. Errors occur in the best of journalism, but our credibility depends upon how quickly we acknowledge and correct errors on air, online and in other appropriate media. We should correct substantive errors promptly and prominently, at a time when you're likely to reach many of the people who heard the original mistake. For example, a mistake broadcast during morning drive should also be corrected during morning drive.
  
11. Audio editing must be faithful to the news event in question while advancing our understanding of the story. Consider, for example, whether eliminating a pause within a soundbite, or making an internal edit, would alter the listener's perception. Ask yourself whether sources would recognize themselves in their soundbites. Be consistent in your editing.
  
12. Public radio should give voice to the range of issues and concerns across our communities. This requires seeking out and presenting diverse sources, defined in terms of age; various racial, ethnic, religious and sexual-orientation groups; and socio-economic classes. Diversity should also be defined in terms of political opinion and social ideas. Don't practice "usual suspects journalism" by calling on the same sources again and again.
  
13. Public radio should make clear to our listeners the differences among fact-based reporting, commentary and analysis. Commentary and analysis require a foundation of fact-based reporting, meaning the issues in question are also dealt with in standard news coverage.

- Fact-based reporting conducted by journalists, as noted above, is grounded in the principles of fairness, accuracy and balance.
- Commentary involves informed opinion on matters in the news; while an individual commentary reflects a single point of view, our commitment to our listeners requires us to provide a range of such perspectives over time.
- Analysis involves consideration of the roots of news stories and their possible outcomes.

14. Public radio should systematically monitor its coverage to assess balance. Balance should be evaluated across a range of stories and programs, as opposed to within individual stories or commentaries.

### Monitoring Balance

Listen systematically to your coverage of a given issue over a set period of time – say, a month. Note whose interest is served by the stories, and whether a particular individual or group comes out looking good or bad. Taken together, do the stories provide a balanced assessment of the issues and participants, or do they slant in one direction?

15. Call-in programs have become a significant part of the programming mix on many public radio stations, and should be subject to the same rigorous editorial standards that guide all our journalism. The range of reasoned opinion in our communities should be reflected in our call-ins, just as it should be heard in our news coverage.

16. Callers sometimes introduce rumors or claims that cannot be immediately verified. Hosts should challenge callers about the source of such claims and make it clear to listeners when information is suspect. Libel, invasion of privacy and innuendo should be scrupulously avoided through judicious screening of calls. Issue corrections dealing

with misstatements of substantive facts when necessary.

17. Cultural content within news programming, and news content within cultural programming, should be guided by the same values and principles that guide public radio journalism.

## In Pursuit of Fairness, Accuracy and Balance

**1. Have the people affected or harmed by the story been given ample opportunity to reply?**

If harm is inevitable, have I sought to minimize it where possible?

**2. Have I provided listeners sufficient background context to understand the story fully?**

Are there major questions left unanswered? Is there anything I know that I am not telling my listeners, which – if they knew it – would change their view of the story?

**3. Might my personal feelings have affected my handling of this story in any way? Do I**

have relationships with sources or subjects that would compromise my ability to cover the story fairly, or allow someone to claim my ability was compromised?

**4. How confident am I about the credibility of this information? Do my sources have vested**

interests in getting this information out? Is there a disinterested, independent source of this information with whom I could check?

**5. If I am using anonymous sources, is there another possible source of the information?**

Can I make a compelling case to my listeners for using the anonymous source?

**6. Have I attributed, documented and double-checked all the basic facts of the story? Did**

my tape editing distort the essence of the actuality or of the event?

**7. Have I sought out all the relevant points of view of the story, and avoided creating**

“artificially polarized” sides? Have I edited the story so that all sides are heard, and in proportion to their importance to the story?

**8. Am I presenting the news and views of all segments of the community I serve? Do I**

continue to “round up the usual suspects” in choosing sources, or have I brought in new sources with new perspectives?

**9. Does the diversity of our staff match the diversity of our community?**

**10. If I broadcasting a “subjective” program with a point of view, have I let my listeners know?**

*-from Independence and Integrity: A Guidebook for Public Radio Journalism (p.28)*



## EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE

The “facts of life” in public radio include the need to seek outside funding to pay for what we do. Money, of course, often comes with strings attached, whether explicit or implicit. Our challenge, then, is to obtain the funds we need, while keeping the funders from influencing our journalism.

To provide listeners with the information they need to make informed choices in our democracy, we cannot be beholden to government, business underwriters or foundations, although we appreciate and acknowledge their important and sustaining contributions. However, keeping faith with our listeners requires us to maintain our editorial independence, and we must be alert to attempts to compromise our standards.

Read more about editorial independence in the original [Independence and Integrity](#) (pp. 48-51).

### Principles:

1. Journalists should set public radio’s editorial agenda and make editorial decisions free from the influence of individuals or organizations that provide funding for our programming.

#### Ask Yourself:

“Is this a story we would cover, a source we would call, or an editorial decision we would make if funding were not available?”

2. Funding decisions must be independent of editorial decisions. Program producers, stations and network management must establish procedures, appropriate for their particular organization, that maintain a “firewall” between funders and journalists. For example, journalists should not be prevailed upon to engage with funders. Unreasonable pressures on journalists create the appearance and the reality of editorial compromise.

3. Funders may shape our news coverage, whether deliberately or not, by offering money to cover certain subjects. Managers should base decisions on whether to accept targeted financial support solely on the interests of the listeners. Would funding enable us to serve them better? Funders should be encouraged to contribute to a general fund that supports all news coverage. In either case, tell your listeners who provides the funds.

### Questions to ask when considering targeted funding –

- Is the issue a legitimate topic for coverage, something we wanted to cover anyway?
- Is the funder's interest altruistic, as opposed to seeking financial or political benefit?
- Would it appear to listeners that the funds come with strings attached?

4. Public radio management and staff must maintain the essential non-commercial nature of our service. Public radio should avoid relationships or activities with commercial entities that might damage the reputation and credibility of our journalistic organization.
5. Most public radio stations are licensed to colleges and universities. While most such licensees respect principles of editorial independence and integrity, journalistic values and institutional interests sometimes conflict. In these instances the needs of the listener should prevail. Journalists can help reduce these conflicts by keeping their licensees informed of stories that may affect them. (See [KPLU's Statement of Editorial Integrity](#) as one model of station/licensee cooperation.)

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST & CODE OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

At a time when many Americans are cynical about media performance, public radio's tradition of independence and integrity is more important than ever. Just as public radio as an institution must be independent from external influences, so too must individual public radio journalists be free of conflicts that impair their ability to gather and present the news in a fair, accurate and balanced manner. Put another way, not only must we be fair, accurate and balanced, our listeners must be confident that we are.

Read more about conflicts of interest and professional conduct on pp. 43-48 in the original [Independence and Integrity](#).

### Front-and-center questions –

- Might my activities and relationships compromise my ability to produce fair, accurate and balanced journalism?
- Might anyone reasonably think my activities and relationships could influence my ability to report?

### Principles:

1. Public radio journalists have an *affirmative responsibility* to disclose any potential conflicts of interest to their managers.
2. Public radio journalists may not use their professional affiliations to advocate for political or social causes. While we all have a stake in the well being of our communities, the line

should be drawn where journalistic credibility may be affected. Well-known personalities must be especially sensitive to the appearance of advocacy.

3. Remember that your public radio affiliation will follow you. When appearing on other media, public radio journalists must adhere to the editorial standards of public radio. Don't say anything you wouldn't say on your own station or network. Remain reportorial!
4. When speaking to outside groups, public radio journalists should refrain from taking sides on public issues. Don't accept honoraria from groups that have an interest in how the news is covered.
5. Paid outside work should be approved by management to ensure that there will be no conflict of interest. Public radio journalists should ensure that any outside activities do not conflict with nor compromise their public radio obligations or the reputation of public radio. Before taking freelance journalistic work, paid or unpaid, public radio journalists should make sure that the tone and content of the publication, Web site or program are in keeping with the standards of public radio. Take special care to ensure that the outside employer is not trading on the name or reputation of public radio.
6. Public radio journalists should not use information gathered in the course of newsgathering for personal or financial advantage. (As a model, see the ["public disclosure" requirements for the Motley Fool investment-news Web site.](#))
7. Public radio journalists should not accept gifts from people they cover. Conventional wisdom holds that if the public pays, the journalist pays. "Freebies" may include meals, travel and lodging, and tickets to sporting or entertainment events. The danger is that the gift-giver may hope to instill in the journalist a sense of obligation or simple good will – perhaps to be repaid later in the form of favorable coverage. Even if the journalist feels no such sense of obligation, it may appear to others that the reporter "could be bought." There are common-sense exceptions for gifts or gestures of token value, such as when a source offers to buy a cup of coffee or provides a piece of chocolate to the reporter covering a story at the candy factory.

How should a journalist respond to an offer of a freebie? – Politely decline.  
Tell the giver that it's our policy not to accept gifts, unless they are of token value.

## Avoiding Conflicts of Interest

- 1. Might my activities and relationships compromise my ability to produce a fair, accurate and balanced report?**
- 2. Might anyone reasonably think my activities and relationships could influence my ability to report?**
- 3. Do I have a role in making editorial decisions about causes or issues in which I am personally involved?**
- 4. Would people on the other side of the issue consider me to be fair, if my involvement were known?**
- 5. If we are offered funding to cover a particular subject, is it a legitimate topic for a story, one we wanted to cover anyway? Or are we covering it because we got the money?**
- 6. Is the funder's interest altruistic, as opposed to seeking financial or political benefit?**
- 7. Would it appear to listeners that the funds come with strings attached?**
- 8. In the interest of full disclosure, have all the funders been named on the broadcast itself?**

-from *Independence and Integrity: A Guidebook for Public Radio Journalism* (p.52)

## ONLINE JOURNALISM

It seems obvious at face value: news presented online – or over new-media platforms – should be subject to the same high journalistic standards as our broadcast service. In practice, however, online journalism remains a work in progress, and the editorial standards are evolving. At issue is how to adapt our core principle of careful editing to often-different forms of online content, such as hypermedia, listener forums and “blogs.”

1. “Raw audio” should not be “streamed” without first being reviewed by an editor (if previously recorded, as in the case of an interview) or overseen by an editor (in the case of live coverage).
2. Before linking to an outside Web site, an editor should closely examine the site’s content. Sites should be reviewed for accuracy, taste, libel and invasion of privacy. Readers should be provided warnings about potentially sensitive material on outside sites, where necessary. Make it clear to readers that you are not responsible for the editorial content or standards of the outside site.

### **‘To link or not to link...’**

”Something to consider when deciding whether to link to an outside site, from the WGBH Web Code (7.8): “Great latitude should be given personal or artistic expression (on linked sites) so long as the postings are not inaccurate or defamatory.”

3. Online forums, in which listeners can express their views on a range of topics, provide a valuable community outlet. However, just as we exercise editorial control over call-in programs, so too

should an editor moderate online forums. The extent and nature of such oversight may vary, based upon station resources and policies. In addition, guidelines for use of the forum should be prominently posted on the Web site. (See the [policies for Minnesota Public Radio.](#))

4. “Blogs,” short for “Weblogs,” are a form of personal journalism that covers a range of online expression from “reporter’s notebook”-type essays to opinion pieces to accounts of somebody’s cousin’s Bar Mitzvah. Blogs offer journalists an opportunity to take readers behind the scenes of a news event, or discuss how they resolve ethical dilemmas. However, public radio bloggers also run the risk of eroding their journalistic credibility if their broadcast fairness and balance may be called into question by something they post online. Once again, the guidelines are to remain reportorial – and get an edit.
  
5. While our Web content must be free from outside influence, it may be harder to erect a firewall online than it is on air. Some stations contract with outside providers to design, maintain or “serve” their Web sites. Further, while underwriting credits can be separated from news segments temporally (as well as with different voices), the nature of the Web makes it difficult to separate editorial and fundraising content online. In such matters the guiding principle should be to avoid online presentation that may lead readers to infer any relationships between editorial and fundraising content, and clearly label any sponsorship or underwriting.

### **Content first...**

“Our Web sites are places where content comes before commerce. Construction of a site should be based only on sound editorial judgments... (G)reat care must be taken to separate promotional and marketing strategies from content development” – WGBH Web Code (6.7)

## WHY AN ETHICS GUIDE FOR PUBLIC RADIO?

Two reasons: Inside the system, public radio journalists and journalistic managers have good instincts about what's right and what's not. But in the rush to deadline, deliberation is difficult, and there just isn't time for discussion. Once the pressure is off and the stories are filed, the need to discuss our editorial decisions seems less urgent. This is an attempt to encourage – and fuel – that internal debate.

This guide provides an overview of some of the most important issues that public radio journalists face, as identified by public radio journalists. It is by no means comprehensive; but it reflects some of the best policies and practices of the system.

Outside the system, our listeners want to know (and deserve to be told) what we stand for and what we stand by. This guide is as much for them as it is for the women and men who work so diligently and passionately to produce the finest radio service in the world.

This guide would not have happened without the initiative of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and especially Kay Tuttle, CPB's director of strategic initiatives. We are grateful to her for asking us to do this. The late Rick Madden, CPB's vice president for radio, played a leadership role in launching public radio's first ethics project, and his spirit pervades this work. His successor, Vincent Curren, has continued to support and encourage this initiative.

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Alan G. Stavitsky  
Associate Dean, School of Journalism and Communication  
University of Oregon

Jeffrey Dvorkin  
NPR Ombudsman  
Washington, D.C.



**POYNTER CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>
Jay Allison	Independent producer, Woods Hole, MA
Tom Bivins	University of Oregon, Eugene, OR
Brian Bull	South Dakota Public Radio, Vermillion, SD
Vincent Curren	CPB, Washington, DC
Jeffrey Dvorkin	NPR Ombudsman, Washington, DC
Bob Ferrante	WGBH, Boston, MA
Martha Foley	North Country Public Radio, Canton, NY
Sue Goodwin	NPR, Talk of the Nation, Washington, DC
Emily Hanford	News Director, WUNC, Chapel Hill, NC
Peter Iglinski	WXXI, Rochester, NY
Jonathan Kern	Executive Producer – NPR Training Department, Washington, DC
Jay Kernis	Sr. VP, NPR Programming, Washington, DC
Debbie Kilmer	CPB Office of Governmental Affairs, Washington, DC
Bill Kovach	Center for Excellence in Journalism, Washington, DC
Denise Leary	Counsel, NPR Legal, Washington, DC

Name	Title
Aileen LeBlanc	WYSO, Yellow Springs, Ohio
Don Lee	MPR, St. Paul, MN
Martha Little	Marketplace, Los Angeles
Danny Miller	WHYY, Philadelphia
Doug Mitchell	Project Manager, Next Generation Radio, NPR, Washington, DC
Matt Shaffer Powell	WUOT Knoxville
Jeff Ramirez	CPB, Washington, DC
Raul Ramirez	KQED San Francisco
Tripp Sommer	News Director, KLCC, Eugene, OR
Dale Spear	PRI, St. Paul, MN
Robert Spier	NPR Online, Washington, DC
Al Stavitsky	Associate Dean, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR
Bob Steele	Poynter Institute, St. Petersburg, FL
Kay Tuttle	CPB, Washington, DC
Connie Walker	Wisconsin Public Radio, Madison, WI
John Watson	Prof., Journalistic Ethics, American University, Washington, DC
Vince Winkel	Public Interactive News Director, Los Angeles

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>
Stewart Vanderwilt	General Manager, KUT, Austin
Jackie Yamanaka	Yellowstone Public Radio, Billings, MT

## HOW TO USE ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING GUIDELINES

Editors' Note: Prof. Tom Bivins, holder of the Hulteng Chair in Media Ethics at the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication, offers the following reflections on how to use editorial decision-making guidelines, such as those included in this Ethics Guide.

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Any moral decision-making process worth its salt must allow for three things: *reflection*, *justification*, and *consistency*.

- In order to rationalize our reasons to ourselves, we must reflect on all of the facets of the dilemma we are facing. We must do so without presumption that any particular course of action is automatically appropriate. An honest assessment will provide the only means to an equitable solution.
- We may be called upon to justify our decisions to others. We must be prepared to do so with the expectation that we will never satisfy everyone, but with the determination to try.
- Finally, we must be consistent, for moral consistency is the one of the hallmarks of integrity, and integrity may be the most valuable coin of the moral realm.

Moral decision making must become routine — so engrained in our professional behavior that we cannot separate it from our other decision-making processes. The ultimate goal of any decision-making tool is to allow for the formulation of principles and guidelines by which to make future decisions. At the very least, its consistent use should so educate the user that future moral decisions might become second nature.

A final caveat: Blind obedience to any one philosophy is not sufficient for an educated analysis of a moral issue.

- Unwavering adherence to any rule, no matter how well-intentioned, can lead to callousness.
- By the same token, service always to the greater good can result in tyrannizing a deserving minority.

- We cannot let our emotions rule our decisions any more than we can let our reason alone (often cold and calculating) do so.
- And, we must remember that service to our professions and service to society are not always one and the same thing.

There are times when each of these may fairly overrule the other. While it is probably true that we can justify almost any decision using an approach such as the ones suggested here, it must be borne in mind that we will be judged not solely by our own principles but, to a greater degree, by the principles of those we most affect.

## REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

### Links to other journalistic ethics codes:

- [NPR](#)
- [BBC](#)
- [CBC](#)
- [New York Times](#)
- [PRNDI](#)
- [RTNDA](#)
- [SPJ](#)

### References:

#### Books

*Campaigns and Conscience: The Ethics of Political Journalism (Praeger Series in Political Communication)*

by Philip Seib (New York: Praeger, 1994)

*Crisis of Conscience: Perspectives on Journalism Ethics*

by Carl Hausman (Stoneham, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992)

*Doing Ethics in Journalism: A Handbook With Case Studies (2nd ed.)*

by Jay Black, Bob Steele and Ralph D. Barney (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1994)

*Ethical Issues in Journalism and the Media*

by Andrew Belsey and Ruth F. Chadwick (New York: Routledge, 1994)

*Ethical Journalism: A Guide for Students, Practitioners, and Consumers*

by Philip Meyer (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992)

*Groping for Ethics in Journalism*

by H. Eugene Goodwin, Ron F. Smith and Gene Goodwin (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1994)

*A History of Public Broadcasting*

By John Witherspoon, Roselle Kovitz, Robert Avery and Alan Stavitsky (Washington: Current Publishing, 2000)

*Holding the Media Accountable: Citizens, Ethics and the Law*

David Hemmings Pritchard, editor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000)

*Independence and Integrity: A Guidebook for Public Radio Journalism*

By Alan G. Stavitsky (Washington: National Public Radio, 1995)

*Journalism Ethics*

by John Calhoun Merrill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996)

*Media Ethics: A Philosophical Approach*

by Matthew Kieran (New York: Praeger, 1997)

*Mixed Media: Moral Distinctions in Advertising, Public Relations, and Journalism* by Tom Bivins

(Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003)

*Mixed News: The Public/Civic/Communitarian Journalism Debate*

edited by Jay Black (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996)

*News Values: Ideas for an Information Age*

by Jack Fuller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996)

*Public Journalism and Public Life: Why Telling the News Is Not Enough (2nd ed.)*

by Davis Merritt (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997)

*Sound Reporting: The National Public Radio Guide to Radio Journalism and Production*

Edited by Marcus D. Rosenbaum and John Dinges (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt, 1992).

## **Media Ethics Web Sites**

[Accuracy in Media](#)

[Ethics and Public Policy Center](#)

[Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting](#)

[The Freedom Forum](#)

[The Pew Center for Civic Journalism](#)

[The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press](#)

[The Poynter Institute for Media Studies](#)

[Project for Excellence in Journalism](#)

## **Publications Dealing with Media and Ethics (among other things)**

[\*American Journalism Review\*](#)

[\*Columbia Journalism Review\*](#)

[\*Online Journalism Review\*](#)



## **Public Radio's National Organizations**

[The Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#)

[The National Federation of Community Broadcasters](#)

[National Public Radio](#)

[Pacifica Radio](#)

[Public Radio International](#)

[Public Radio News Directors Inc.](#)

[Public Radio Program Directors Inc.](#)

## **Other Professional Media Organizations**

[American Society of Magazine Editors](#)

[American Society of Newspaper Editors](#)

[Asian American Journalists Association](#)

[National Association of Black Journalists](#)

[National Association of Hispanic Journalists](#)

[National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association](#)

[Native American Journalists Association](#)

[Online News Association](#)

[Organization of News Ombudsmen](#)

[The Society of Professional Journalists](#)

