Guiding Principles for Inclusive, Accurate, and Unbiased Coverage

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GIFFORDS
COURAGE TO FIGHT GUN VIOLENCE

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FREEDOM IS FOR
EVERYBODY

Overview

Ethical journalism is the foundation of democracy. According to the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics, reporters have one clear role: to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair, and thorough. The SPJ also defines the four foundational principles of ethical journalism as:

1. Seek truth and report it.
2. Minimize harm.
3. Act independently.
4. Be accountable and transparent.

Unfortunately, in today's digital age of rampant disinformation, too many journalists are falling victim to disinformation tactics that are making their way into mainstream news articles. This has a significant impact on how readers understand the most salient issues driving the national conversation. There are examples of this across issue areas: well-meaning articles about an abortion ban inadvertently amplify disinformation about abortion or allow intentionally charged rhetoric to go unchecked; stories about gun safety use terminology that lends credence to the gun lobby's arguments, such as "gun control" and "constitutional carry"; articles about immigration issues may take official statements from voices of institutional power [e.g. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP)] at face value; or stories about anti-trans legislation exclude the voices of transgender people. Even the most experienced and well-intentioned reporters and editors can sometimes use language or imagery that is harmful.

In order to meet these ethical journalism standards, reporting must include necessary context and nuance when covering issues that are often clouded by disinformation. We know we each have a stance—there is no denying that. But, we believe that in order to make informed decisions about what language to use, who to include in stories, and why, reporters must be presented with all the information. That is why we have pulled together a list of guiding principles to help reporters spot disinformation, add necessary context to sources and information, and write stories that are accurate and unbiased—and truly tell the whole story.

Principles

1. **Include the perspectives of people and communities who are directly impacted by the issue/policy.**

<u>Examples:</u>

If writing about an abortion ban:
- ✓ DO include the perspective of a person who has had an abortion or faced barriers to accessing care.
- ✗ **DO NOT** only use the perspectives of politicians or extremist groups to represent the mainstream perspectives of an issue.

If writing about gun safety:
- ✓ **DO** include the voices of survivors of gun violence and communities that are disproportionately affected.
- ✗ **DO NOT** give equal weight to sides of the issue if they are not equally weighted in public opinion, or if one opinion is based in disinformation.

If writing about immigration:
- ✓ **DO** include the voices of immigrants who are directly impacted.
- ✗ **DO NOT** publish details that could harm a source's safety (instead, allow for the use of pseudonyms or for sources to remain anonymous at their request.)

If writing about the LGBTQ community:
- ✓ **DO** include the voices of directly impacted LGBTQ people.
- ✗ **DO NOT** force a subject to disclose their identities to you, or ignore the intersections of identity that are relevant to a story.

2. **Avoid amplifying disinformation, falsehoods, inflammatory imagery, and/or inaccurate terminology.** If it is impossible to avoid (such as when falsehoods appear in official documents), include adequate context. When a quoted subject mentions falsehoods, avoid publishing it or contextualize the fact that the quote is false.

<u>Examples:</u>

If writing about an abortion ban coined as a "heartbeat bill":
- ✓ **DO** include context that the bill bans access to abortion when fetal cardiac activity can first be detected, before many people know they are pregnant. This cardiac activity is electric activity among cells that will eventually become the heart, but is not the same as a heartbeat that pumps blood.
- ✕ **DO NOT** label the bill a "heartbeat bill" without appropriate context.

If writing about transgender equality, and a subject misgenders or deadnames someone (uses a previous name used by a transgender person that is not their current name):
- ✓ **DO** prioritize using the correct gender of that person within that quote or provide a correction after the quote.
- ✕ **DO NOT** use the portion of the quote where someone is misgendered or deadnamed.

If writing about laws that allow the concealed carry of guns without a permit:
- ✓ DO include context about the actual effects these laws have on public safety, in addition to the voices of those who have increased fear for their safety due to these laws.
- ✕ **DO NOT** use gun lobby terms like "constitutional carry," which perpetuate falsehoods about what the Second Amendment does and does not protect.

3. Include important context on national public opinion.

<u>Examples:</u>

If writing about Roe v. Wade:
- ✓ DO include the context that 77% of Americans support keeping the landmark decision in place.
- ✗ **DO NOT** omit the context of widespread support.

If writing about a mass shooting:
- ✓ **DO** provide context that situates mass shootings within the context of a larger epidemic that costs 40,000 lives each year, and includes widespread (90% and above) support for commonsense reforms like universal background checks.
- ✗ **DO NOT** use outdated and inaccurate terms such as "gun control" that lend credence to the gun lobby's fear-mongering or humanize and [give notoriety](#) to the shooter while downplaying the humanity of victims.

If writing about immigration reform legislation:
- ✓ DO be clear about the fact that the majority of Americans support a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants with 80% of Americans backing permanent legal status for undocumented immigrants, including a 64% majority that support citizenship.
- ✗ **DO NOT** ignore the reality that Congress continued to increase funding for ICE and CBP while militarizing the border, while not having passed a pathway to citizenship for undocumented people since 1986.

If writing about bills impacting healthcare for trans youth:
- ✓ DO note that the majority of Americans, including Republicans, oppose these bills, understanding that elected officials are not always acting in the interests of those who support them.
- ✗ **DO NOT** place public opinion above medical expertise, which states that transition-related care for transgender youth is vital, life-saving, and supported by major medical associations.

4. **Add necessary context to sources.** *It is important to include all perspectives when possible, but it is equally important to add context to sources who are actively spreading disinformation. In addition, it is critical to vet sources and determine both their relevance to the piece and what informs their expertise.*

Sample questions to ask about sources:

- What is the source's authority on the topic?
- Is the source known to spread disinformation? If so, is context necessary in order to share their perspective in a neutral way?
- How is the source using facts to support their stance/perspective on this issue?
- What research or experiences has this source had to inform their position or expertise on this topic?

Examples:

If you are including a quote from a gun lobby group purporting to speak for all gun owners, or an individual affiliated with the gun lobby:
- ✔ **DO** contextualize the source's or source organization's vested financial interest in eliminating gun laws and putting more guns in the hands of more people.
- ✘ **DO NOT** present gun owners as a homogeneous group represented by the NRA and other gun lobby groups, or uncritically cite studies funded by the gun lobby.

If you are including a quote from a leader of a hate group in an article about immigration:
- ✔ **DO** include information about the individual's work and context. Do not use that quote that includes disinformation, or, if necessary, name the quote as disinformation in the story.
- ✘ **DO NOT** quote anti-immigrant hate groups without providing context on their background as nativists with a history of eugenics.

If you are sourcing information from an anti-choice "research" group:
- ✔ **DO** include that the anti-choice movement has established organizations dedicated to raising false claims about the risks of abortion, contraception, IVF, and more under the guise of medical expertise.
- ✘ **DO NOT** quote such resources without verifying and contextualizing their methodology, including the wording of polling.

If you are interviewing an anti-LGBTQ bill sponsor or supporter:
- ✔ **DO** ask the interviewee to concretely identify an example in their district of a problem the bill solves, rather than allowing them to fearmonger using hypotheticals.
- ✘ **DO NOT** fail to disclose a sponsor or supporter's connections to known anti-LGBTQ hate groups or known anti-LGBTQ political donors.

If you are including a quote from police, ICE, CBP, or another institutional power regarding immigration policy or an individual in detention:
- ✔ **DO** recognize how this institution has historically harmed marginalized communities, including people of color and LGBTQ communities.
- ✘ **DO NOT** assume official statements from such sources do not require verification or fact-checking, especially when the statement is about their own actions.

When in doubt, don't hesitate to reach out! Connecting with relevant perspectives and tracking down context in short order can understandably be a challenge, especially when news is breaking and deadlines are tight. Our organizations can help you connect with sources who are directly impacted, identify national public opinion statistics, and help find academic, legal, and other issue area experts. Please don't hesitate to reach out to us at the below contact information.

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