

Code of Ethics

This is the first professional Code of Ethics created for all Quebec journalists. Discussed at the 1994-96 annual meetings of the Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec (FPJQ), the Code was formally adopted at the FPJQ's general assembly on November 24, 1996.

Preamble

The role of journalists is to accurately report, analyze, and in some cases, comment on the facts that help their fellow citizens understand the world in which they live.

Complete, exact and diverse information is one of the most important guarantees of freedom and democracy. When information is of public interest, it must always circulate freely. Facts and ideas must be communicated without constraint or obstacle. Knowing that a free press acts as an indispensable watchdog over authority and institutions, journalists must defend the freedom of the press and the public's right to information; they must fight any restrictions, pressures and threats that aim to limit the gathering and dissemination of information.

Journalists serve the public interest – not personal or specific interests. As such, they have a responsibility to publish everything that is of public interest. This obligation must override any desire to serve information sources or to favour the financial and competitive needs of news organizations.

Journalists must take their role very seriously. They must demand of themselves the same ethical qualities they demand of newsmakers; in other words, they cannot denounce other people's conflicts of interest, and at the same time, accept their own.

This Code establishes the ethical rules that should guide journalistic work. These rules lay the foundation for a journalist's most precious asset: credibility.

Since it takes into account the specific nature of the journalistic environment, this is not a Code in the strictest sense of the word. There is no professional body in Quebec to which journalists must belong. Neither the title of journalist nor the journalistic act are reserved for a particular group of people. The journalistic world is open, and that is the way journalists want it to be. Since there is no disciplinary board with the necessary legal authority to sanction breaches of ethics, journalists are subject to the body of laws that govern the lives of all citizens.

In its current form, this Code has no disciplinary powers. Yet it remains indispensable for journalists, news organizations and the public. Journalism is increasingly practised outside of large newsrooms; as a result, it is becoming more difficult to transmit journalistic culture – ethical norms – from one generation to the next. As some journalists work in isolation throughout their entire careers, they do not benefit from a newsroom environment. This Code can thus serve as a pertinent reference point.

It will also serve as a useful reminder for journalists, editors and managers who work in newsrooms and who may sacrifice ethics to the demands of competition. Without the support of management, the application of these ethical norms would be difficult. This Code must serve as an inspiration as much for large national media as for regional and smaller media.

The review board of the Conseil de presse du Québec can also use this Code to support its decisions when it investigates complaints.

Finally, both the public and information sources would benefit from a more precise knowledge of the ethical norms that should guide journalistic work. This Code will help them better judge journalistic behaviour. It will also demonstrate journalists' desire to better serve the public.

1. Definition

The term « journalist » in this Code refers to all people who exercise a journalistic function for a news organization. In the context of publicly disseminating information or opinions, this includes one or several of the following tasks: researching, reporting, interviewing; writing or preparing reports, analyses, commentaries, or specialized columns; translating or adapting texts; press photography, filmed or electronic reports; assignment, the desk (headlines, layout...), editing; caricatures; information drawing and graphics; animation, producing and supervising current affairs programs and films; managing news, public affairs or other comparable departments.

2. Fundamental journalistic values

The fundamental values of journalists include: a critical viewpoint, so they methodically doubt everything; impartiality, so they research and expose the diverse aspects of a given situation; fairness, so they view all citizens as equal before the press as they are before the law; independence, so they maintain their distance from authority and lobby groups; public respect and compassion, so they demonstrate moderation; honesty, so they display a scrupulous respect for facts and are openminded. This in turn demonstrates a receptiveness to unfamiliar realities, and an ability to report on these realities without prejudice.

3. Truth and rigour

3a) Accuracy

Journalists must rigorously gather and verify information to ensure their facts are accurate. They must correct their mistakes diligently and appropriately with regard to the harm they have caused.

3b) Context

Journalists must put their facts and opinions in their proper context so they are understandable, without exaggerating or diminishing their scope.

3c) Headlines

Headlines and introductions of articles and news reports should not exaggerate or lead to misinterpretation.

3d) Personal opinions

So as not to confuse the public, journalists must carefully distinguish between personal opinions, analysis and factual information. Above all, they must give a precise account of the facts. In the case of editorials, columns and opinion pieces, or in advocacy journalism where opinions dominate, journalists must also respect the facts.

3e) Rumours

A rumour cannot be published unless it originates from a credible source and contributes to the understanding of an event. It must always be identified as a rumour. In the judicial field, the publication of rumours is prohibited.

3f) Quotations

Journalists must give an accurate account of what people say. Quotations, editing, sound effects, etc., and the sequence in which they are presented, must not distort the meaning of people's words.

3g) Images

Photographs, graphics, sounds and images that are published or broadcast must represent reality as accurately as possible. Artistic concerns should not result in public deception. Edited images and photographs must be identified as such.

3h) Plagiarism

Journalists must never plagiarize. If they use an exclusive piece of information that has just been published or broadcast by another media organization, they must identify the source.

4. Gathering information

Journalists exercise their profession openly by always identifying themselves as journalists. They gather information by established journalistic methods: interviews, bibliographic research, consultation of files and contacts, etc.

4a) Undercover procedures

In certain cases, journalists are justified in obtaining the information they seek through undercover means: false identities, hidden microphones and cameras, imprecise information about the objectives of their news reports, spying, infiltrating...

These methods must always be the exception to the rule. Journalists use them when:

- * the information sought is of definite public interest; for example, in cases where socially reprehensible actions must be exposed;

- * the information cannot be obtained or verified by other means, or other means have already been used unsuccessfully;

- * the public gain is greater than any inconvenience to individuals.

The public must be informed of the methods used.

4b) Sources who are unfamiliar with the media

Journalists must tell sources who are unfamiliar with the media that their remarks may be published or broadcast and thus communicated to a large group of people.

4c) Harassment

Journalists must show compassion and respect for people who have suffered tragedies, and for those close to them; they must avoid harassing people to obtain information.

5. Dissemination of information

5a) Re-enactments and Dramatizations

Whenever possible, journalists should use real events in their reports rather than re-enactments by diverse artificial means. Although re-enactments of events and dramatizations may be used in journalism to illustrate and support a report, journalists must use caution to avoid deceiving the public. Before resorting to these techniques, journalists must evaluate if they are the best and only way to help the public understand a situation. The public must thus be clearly informed when re-enactments or dramatizations are used.

Re-enactments should be limited to reproducing as accurately as possible the facts, opinions, and emotions that surround the re-created event.

When journalists ask the people they are filming to speak on the telephone, for example, it is a harmless dramatization. As long as it does not modify the content of the report, it has no impact. This kind of staging does not have to be identified in the news report.

Yet in the case of more elaborate re-enactments, journalists must demonstrate extreme prudence. They must avoid manipulating reality, for example, by inciting demonstrators to use violence in front of their cameras.

When invited to raids organized by the police or to re-enactments orchestrated by sources, journalists must maintain a critical perspective.

If there is an attempt to portray these re-enactments as spontaneous events, journalists must ensure the public knows the truth.

Archival documents must be identified as such, and should indicate the date and place.

5b) Rules of conversation

If there is no explicit agreement, journalists are not obliged to follow the rules of conversation (« off the record », « background », « publication without naming the source »). These kinds of rules must be established before the

conversation – not after. To avoid being manipulated by their sources, journalists must limit these rules to the best of their ability.

5c) Sources' approval

Journalists should not seek sources' approval before publishing or broadcasting their stories.

5d) Publicity

When journalists disseminate information, they should not be influenced by their sources; in addition, they must refuse to disseminate information in exchange for advertising for their news organizations or for any other benefit. There must be a clear separation between information and publicity. Journalists must not write info-mercials. If they are obliged to do so, they never sign them.

Info-mercials must be clearly identified so they are not in any way confused – even by their lay-out – with information. Journalists must cover events sponsored by their own media with the same rigour they apply to every other event.

In all cases, journalists must judge the pertinence of their stories by their merit, public interest, and any other available information.

5e) Identification of suspects and the accused

Journalists must respect the presumed innocence of all citizens. When an arrest warrant has been issued, or there has been an arrest or the start of formal judicial procedures, journalists can identify citizens. Nonetheless, they must ensure they do not present them as criminals; for example, they should use the conditional.

If there have been no arrest warrants or judicial procedures – and unless their suspicions stem from rigorous journalistic work that aims to shed light on socially reprehensible acts – journalists must be cautious about revealing the identity of suspects.

5f) Follow-up

When media organizations have covered an incident where individuals have been incriminated and prosecuted, they must continue to follow the story as closely as possible, and ensure the public is informed of the end result.

5g) Identification of victims

In most cases, journalists can reveal the names of victims of accidents and criminal acts. This information is of public interest; its disclosure is especially important when the victim is a public figure or when the facts may affect the social responsibilities or public mandates of the individuals in question.

Unless there are exceptional circumstances, journalists must not identify the victims of sexual aggression or the people close to them.

6. Protection of sources and journalistic material

Journalists must identify their sources so that the public can best evaluate their competence, credibility and interests.

6a) Anonymity

In some cases journalists cannot gather and disseminate important information without guaranteeing their sources complete anonymity. Yet some people may use this anonymity to manipulate public opinion with impunity or to cause harm to individuals without assuming responsibility.

Anonymity should be granted only as a last resort and in exceptional circumstances:

- * when the information is important and there are no other identifiable sources to provide it;
- * when the information is of public interest;

* when the sources seeking anonymity could suffer prejudice if their identities were revealed.

In these cases, journalists should explain the justification for anonymity, and without identifying the sources, provide a sufficient description so that the public can appreciate the sources' skills, interests and credibility.

6b) Promise of confidentiality

Unless they have been intentionally deceived by their sources, journalists must always respect a promise of anonymity. Journalists can reveal the identity of a confidential source to their superiors, but only if the latter also agree to respect the promise of confidentiality.

6c) Journalistic material

Whether published or not, journalistic material (notes, photographs, videos, etc.) should only be used to inform the public. Journalists should not provide material for any other purposes.

6d) Journalists as witnesses

Journalists must not act as police informers. In court, they should only reveal information that has already been made public in the media.

6e) Paying sources

Journalists and news organizations must not pay people who act as information sources.

7. Private life and the right to information

Journalists must respect an individual's right to privacy. They must also defend the right to information; this is a fundamental individual right which enriches the private life of citizens by permitting them to broaden their horizons and knowledge. Yet these two rights may conflict. When private information is of public interest rather than simple public curiosity, journalists must give precedence to the right to information.

This is of particular importance:

- * when public figures or individuals who have public responsibility are involved, and when certain elements of their private lives shed light on the way they exercise their public duties, or when they place their public lives or public behaviour in proper perspective;
- * when an individual makes his or her private life public;
- * when private affairs take place in the public domain.

8. Individual rights

Journalists must treat all people fairly. Characteristics such as race, religion, sexual orientation, disabilities, etc., are to be mentioned only when they are pertinent.

Yet journalists must also be aware of the scope of their stories. They must avoid: generalizations that harm minority groups; incendiary remarks; non-pertinent allusions to individual characteristics and prejudices; systematically unfavourable angles that encourage discrimination. They must be particularly attentive to anything that could provoke reactions that are racist, sexist, homophobic, etc.

9. Conflicts of interest

Whether monetary or not, journalists must avoid situations that could create a conflict of interest, or that could even have the appearance of a conflict of interest. They must avoid any behaviour, commitment or job that could weaken their independent stance, or that could sow doubt in the mind of the public.

When journalists serve or seem to serve specific interests, there is a conflict of interest. These interests may be their

own or those of other individuals, groups, unions, companies, political parties, etc. The conflict of interest can occur through diverse contracts, favours or public commitments. Public interest should be the only principle that guides a journalist's choice to publish information. Facts should not be suppressed in order to preserve or enhance the image of a particular individual or group. By breaking the indispensable link of confidence between journalists and their public, conflicts of interest cast doubt or may appear to cast doubt on a journalist's choice to disseminate information.

The fact that journalists may be deeply convinced they are honest and impartial does not make a conflict of interest acceptable. The appearance of a conflict of interest is as damaging as a true conflict.

9a) Public relations

Journalists must refrain from working in any form of communications that is outside the field of journalism; this includes public relations, publicity, promotions, courses on how to deal with the media, staged news conferences to prepare spokespeople for their dealings with journalists, etc. These tasks serve specific interests and aim to transmit a partisan message to the public. Journalists cannot communicate partisan information one day, and impartial information the next. This confuses the public and casts doubt on a journalist's credibility and integrity.

9b) Privileges

Journalists should not use their professional status or the information gathered in the exercising of their duties for their own benefit or to help the people close to them.

In the same way, journalists must not lie or publish information to help themselves or the people close to them.

When applicable, journalists should give their employers a list of assets and interests, including those held in corporations.

9c) Gifts and Other Rewards

Journalists must refuse gifts and other rewards that may be offered as a result of their duties. Gifts should be returned to the senders with an explanation.

Accepting gifts compromises journalistic impartiality or the appearance of impartiality. Gifts do not constitute a normal benefit of the journalistic profession.

Gifts are only acceptable when they serve a direct purpose in journalistic work: books; records; free tickets to cover exhibits and shows; in the case of consumer journalism, certain objects, etc. After being used, and unless they are being kept for reference purposes, these objects should be given to community or public organizations whenever possible.

A gift can also be acceptable when its value is of little importance, and when the cost of returning it to the sender exceeds the cost of the object.

9d) Journalism contests

Journalists can compete in journalism contests or act as jury members as long as the contests serve their profession.

Contests serve the interests of journalism when the jury is independent of any sponsors, when the majority of people serving on the jury are journalists, and when the work is judged according to recognized journalistic criteria. In these cases, a journalist's credibility cannot be used to support or invalidate a cause; as well, the awards will only serve the future work of journalists.

9e) Paid trips

Journalists and media must pay the costs associated with covering their stories. They must not accept free trips or financial aid from public or private organizations that are seeking media coverage.

Trips that are paid by sources can distort coverage by favouring wealthy interest groups. They can also – at least in appearance – limit journalists' freedom of expression.

A trip offered by a source can nonetheless be accepted:

* when there is no other way of obtaining information or no other way of travelling to the site. In this case, the media

organization should evaluate and reimburse the cost of the trip;

* when the trip provides professional training and is not used to gather stories.

If – in exceptional circumstances and as a last resort – media organizations accept a trip paid by a source, journalists must protect their professional freedom while covering the story. In addition, they must explicitly inform the public that their trips were paid by a source.

10. Conscience clause

Journalists are responsible for their own acts, and cannot blame others for what they have done. They must not be forced to resort to unethical practices, or to put their names on stories that have been substantially modified.