

LOS ANGELES TIMES ETHICS GUIDELINES

INTRODUCTION

The goal of the Los Angeles Times is to publish a newspaper of the highest quality. This requires The Times to be, above all else, a principled newspaper. Making it so is the responsibility of every staff member.

In deed and in appearance, journalists at The Times must keep themselves – and the newspaper – above reproach.

The ways a newspaper can discredit itself are beyond calculation; these guidelines do not purport to cover them all. It is up to staff members to master these general principles and, beyond that, to listen carefully to their individual sense of right and wrong. If you know of anything that might cast a shadow on the paper's reputation, you are expected to inform a supervising editor.

This can be an uncomfortable duty; under some circumstances, it can do harm to one's relationships with others in the newsroom. It is a duty nevertheless. Credibility, a newspaper's most precious asset, is arduously acquired and easily squandered. It can be maintained only if each of us accepts responsibility for it.

The standards outlined here apply to all editorial employees and to all work they produce for The Times, whether it appears in print, on television or on the Web.

When uncertainty arises about the application of these guidelines, the primary goal always should be to protect the paper's integrity. When in doubt, do not be shy about asking questions. A robust, ongoing discussion of ethics at all levels of the newsroom is essential to producing a first-rate newspaper.

CONTENT

Fairness

A fair-minded reader of Times news coverage should not be able to discern the private opinions of those who contributed to that coverage, or to infer that the newspaper is promoting any agenda. A crucial goal of our news and feature reporting – apart from editorials, columns, criticism and other content that is expressly opinionated – is to be nonideological. This is a tall order. It requires us to recognize our own biases and stand apart from them. It also requires us to examine the ideological environment in which we work, for the biases of our sources, our colleagues and our communities can distort our sense of objectivity.

In covering controversial issues – strikes, abortion, gun control and the like – we seek out intelligent, articulate views from all perspectives. Reporters should try genuinely to understand all points of view, rather than simply grab quick quotations to create a semblance of balance.

People who will be shown in an adverse light in an article must be given a meaningful opportunity to defend themselves. This means making a good-faith effort to give the subject of allegations or criticism sufficient time and information to respond substantively. Whenever possible, the reporter should meet face-to-face with the subject in a sincere effort to understand his or her best arguments.

Investigative reporting requires special diligence with respect to fairness. Those involved in such stories should bear in mind that they are more credible when they provide a rich, nuanced account of the topic. Our coverage should avoid simplistic portrayals.

Sources

We report in environments – Hollywood and Washington, to name two – where anonymity is routinely sought and casually granted. We stand against that practice and seek to minimize it. We are committed to informing readers as completely as possible; the use of anonymous sources compromises this important value.

These standards are not intended to discourage reporters from cultivating sources who are wary of publicity. Such informants can be invaluable. But the information they provide can often be verified with sources willing to be named, from documents, or both. We should make every effort to obtain such verification. Relying in print on unnamed sources should be a last resort, subject to the following guidelines:

When we use anonymous sources, it should be to convey important information to our readers. We should not use such sources to publish material that is trivial, obvious or self-serving.

Sources should never be permitted to use the shield of anonymity to voice speculation or to make ad hominem attacks.

An unnamed source should have a compelling reason for insisting on anonymity, such as fear of retaliation, and stories should state those reasons when they are relevant.

The reporter and editor must be satisfied that the source has a sound factual basis for his or her assertions. Some sources quoted anonymously might tend to exaggerate or overreach precisely because they will not be named.

Stories should identify sources as completely as possible consistent with the promise of anonymity. In particular, a source's point of view and potential biases should be disclosed as fully as possible. For instance, "an advisor to Democratic members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee" is preferable to "a Congressional source."

When practical, a reporter should consult an editor before entering into an agreement to protect a source's anonymity. In some cases, an editor may insist on knowing the source's identity in order to evaluate the reliability of the information provided.

In rare instances, sources may insist that the paper and the reporter resist subpoenas and judicial orders, if necessary, to protect their anonymity. Reporters should consult a masthead editor before entering into any such agreement.

Even in the absence of such an agreement, the possibility exists that a prosecutor, grand jury or judge will demand to know a source's identity, forcing the reporter to choose between unmasking the source and going to jail for contempt of court. Such situations are rare, and they should not deter us from investigating sensitive or contentious matters.

Reporters should be extremely circumspect about how and where they store information that might identify an anonymous source. Many electronic records, including e-mail, can be subpoenaed from and retrieved by non-newsroom employees.

Promises to a source must be kept except under the most extraordinary circumstances. If a source, acting in bad faith, were to succeed in using the newspaper to spread misinformation, we would consider our promise of anonymity no longer binding. That said, we do not “burn” sources.

Access

The Times does not make deals in exchange for access. When negotiating with Hollywood publicists, for instance, we do not make promises regarding story placement or angle of approach. That such deals are commonplace among entertainment media does not make them acceptable at The Times.

It is permissible to discuss, in general terms, the scope and direction of the story we have in mind. It should be clear, however, that the ultimate placement and angle of a story are for reporters and editors to decide.

This policy does not prohibit us from agreeing to delay publication of information provided under embargo.

The Times does not pay sources for information.

Precision

We live and work in a media environment suffused with hyperbole. It is The Times’ intention to stand distinctly apart from that world and speak straightforwardly to readers.

Fabrication of any type is unacceptable. We do not create composite characters. We do not use pseudonyms. We do not exaggerate sourcing (a single source is a “source,” not “sources.”). We do not manufacture, embroider or distort quotes, either in print or in the video and audio clips posted on our website.

Superlatives such as “biggest,” “worst” and “most” should be employed only when the writer has proof. It is the responsibility of assigning editors and copy editors to challenge all questionable claims. The burden of proof rests with the writer; it is not the desk’s responsibility to prove the writer wrong.

It is unacceptable to hedge an unverified or unverifiable assertion with words such as “arguably” or “perhaps.” Our job is to tell readers what is true, not what might be.

Datelines are statements of fact and are intended to show where a story was principally reported. Visiting an area fleetingly solely to justify a dateline is not acceptable.

Context will sometimes guide the application of these guidelines on precision. There may be instances when hyperbole or sarcasm are used for comic or literary effect. Columnists may use those devices to make a point, as may humorists. They should be employed with care.

Credit

We report our own stories, but when we rely on the work of others, we credit them. Facts garnered from standard reference material may not always have to be attributed. But care should be taken to cross-check facts and to use a variety of reliable sources.

Juveniles and victims of sex crimes

The Times does not identify the alleged victims of sex crimes or persons under 18 who are charged with crimes. Exceptions occasionally arise. The decision to name individuals in such cases rests with the editor or managing editor or an editor designated by them.

Criminal suspects

In general, The Times does not identify suspects of criminal investigations who have not been charged or arrested. On occasion, the prominence of the suspect or the importance of the case will warrant an exception to this policy. In those instances, we must take great care that our sourcing is reliable and that law enforcement officials have a reasonable basis for considering the individual a suspect. If someone we have identified as a suspect ultimately is not charged, we should make that known in a follow-up story. The follow-up should be played comparably to the original story if possible.

Staff conduct

The Times expects its editorial staff to behave with dignity and professionalism. We do nothing while gathering the news that we would be ashamed to see in print or on television. We do not let the behavior of the pack set standards for us.

In general, we identify ourselves as staff members when covering news events. There are some instances when offering such identification is impossible, impractical or counterproductive, but in no case should a staff member lie about his or her affiliation with The Times. We should deal honorably with people and institutions we cover, just as we expect them to deal honorably with us.

Times journalists may not use their affiliation with the newspaper to resolve personal disputes or seek special treatment or personal benefits.

Corrections and Clarifications

When we make mistakes, we quickly and forthrightly correct the record. Readers and staff members who bring mistakes to our attention deserve our gratitude. A staff member who receives a complaint about the accuracy of a story should inform an editor. No staff member should decide on his or her own that a complaint does not warrant a correction. (Note: The Times' corrections policy spells out in greater detail our procedures for handling complaints, corrections and retraction demands.)

PHOTOS and GRAPHICS

Photographs and graphics must inform, not mislead. Any attempt to confuse readers or misrepresent visual information is prohibited.

In photographing news, we do not stage or reenact events. Photographers may direct subjects of portraits, fashion shoots or studio work. In presenting such images, we must avoid creating the impression that they were captured spontaneously.

We do not add color, create photomontages, remove objects or flop images. We do not digitally alter images beyond making minor adjustments for color correction, exposure correction and removal of dust spots or scratches required to ensure faithful

reproduction of the original image. Exaggerated use of burning, dodging or color saturation is not permitted.

On occasion, we publish artistic or graphic renderings that include altered photographs. Such renderings should be clearly labeled “photo illustration.” Before creating a photo illustration, photographers, photo editors and designers must obtain approval from a Senior Editor for photography.

Complex graphic illustrations should be similarly labeled.

Photo editors must verify the authenticity of handout photos. Except in rare instances, credit lines must identify the source of such photographs.

OTHER MEDIA

The growing use of electronic media by The Times creates challenges that may, on occasion, require staff members to apply the principles embodied in these guidelines in new ways. To cite one possible example: journalists should understand that a person who consents to a tape-recorded interview may not want the recording made available on our website.

The Times increasingly is engaged in video production, both for the Web and for other Tribune outlets. In general, video is governed by the same ethical practices as still photography (see above). Distortion of any type is improper. In editing video, do not insert words or splice together statements made at different times so as to suggest that they were uttered at the same time. Excerpts of an interview or address generally should be presented in the order that they occurred. If an interview is presented in question-and-answer format, the questions must be presented as they were asked. Reaction shots may not be altered after the fact and should be shot in the presence of the interview subject whenever possible. Staging is prohibited.

In rare instances, re-creations of events may be justified; they must be clearly labeled as such. Video, images or graphics obtained from outside sources must be clearly identified.

Times journalists who accept invitations to appear on other Tribune outlets or in other media forums should be mindful that their remarks require the same care, discretion and neutrality as their published reports in the newspaper.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Guidelines cannot cover every conceivable conflict of interest. If doubt exists, staff members should consult a supervisor. Nevertheless, some principles are clear.

Financial Investments

Staff members may not enter into business or financial relationships with their sources. Similarly, staff members may not cover individuals or institutions with which they have a financial relationship.

In no circumstance will staff members allow personal investments to influence their news decisions. They may not work on stories that could, in any way, shape events for

their own financial gain. Likewise, they may not use nonpublic information obtained by The Times to make personal investment decisions.

In the case of, say, a personal finance columnist who owns securities in a company or shares in a fund, the columnist must disclose this financial interest to readers whenever writing about the company or fund.

Because these issues arise most frequently for journalists covering business, a supplementary set of guidelines applies to the business staff.

Outside affiliations and community work

Editorial employees may not use their positions at the paper to promote personal agendas or causes. Nor should they allow their outside activities to undermine the impartiality of Times coverage, in fact or appearance.

Staff members may not engage in political advocacy – as members of a campaign or an organization specifically concerned with political change. Nor may they contribute money to a partisan campaign or candidate. No staff member may run for or accept appointment to any public office.

Staff members should avoid public expressions or demonstrations of their political views – bumper stickers, lawn signs and the like.

While The Times does not seek to restrict staff members' participation in civic life or journalistic organizations, they should be aware that outside affiliations and memberships may create real or apparent ethical conflicts. When those affiliations have even the slightest potential to damage the newspaper's credibility, staff members should proceed with caution and take care to advise supervisors.

Some types of civic participation may be deemed inappropriate. An environmental writer, for instance, would be prohibited from affiliating with environmental organizations, a health writer from joining medical groups, a business editor from membership in certain trade or financial associations.

More broadly, staff members should be aware of the goals and funding sources of organizations with which they affiliate, and should avoid those whose purpose or backing could cause the paper or staff member embarrassment.

Times journalists occasionally are invited to speak to organizations or to appear on discussion panels. Before accepting, they should consider the purpose of the event and how it might be perceived. Staff members should avoid situations in which their participation could be construed as endorsement of the sponsoring organization's interests. In general, staff members should refuse honoraria for appearances, though exceptions may be made when the sponsors are educational institutions or journalistic organizations.

Staff members should be careful during such appearances not to make comments that stray beyond what they would write in the newspaper.

The Times, like many newspapers, for years has allowed its sports writers to participate in voting for baseball's Hall of Fame, college football's Heisman Trophy and national rankings in college sports, among other areas. Participation in these polls creates possibilities for conflicts of interest. Similar issues arise in the arts when journalists are invited to vote for awards and prizes in film, literature and other fields.

In general, it is inappropriate for reporters to vote for awards and rankings; doing so could reasonably be seen as compromising their objectivity. For critics, whose job is to express opinions on the merits of creative works, awards voting is less troublesome.

Nevertheless, any staff member invited to vote for an award must first receive the permission of the managing editor. No staff member who votes for an award – whether in sports, the arts or any other area – may be part of the paper’s news coverage of that award.

Personal Relationships

Activities of family members may create conflicts of interest. The Times recognizes that it has no authority to restrict the activities of spouses, companions or close relatives of Times staff members who do not themselves work for the newspaper. However, the paper may restrict a staff member’s assignment based on the activities of a family member or loved one. Staff members are responsible for informing a supervisor whenever a companion’s or close relative’s activities, investments or affiliations could create a conflict.

Awards

Staff members should enter their work only in contests whose central purpose is to recognize journalistic excellence. The Times does not participate in contests that exist primarily to publicize or further the cause of an organization. Under no circumstances may staff members accept awards from groups they cover. A staff member who is offered an award should consult his or her supervisor before accepting it.

PERQUISITES

Meals

As a principle, we pay our own way. However, news gathering often occurs in settings where payment is awkward or impossible. When that happens, staff members should make every effort to reciprocate as soon as possible. Let common sense and good manners be the guide.

It is Times policy to reimburse organizations that provide meals or refreshments to journalists covering events they sponsor.

Travel

The Times also pays for travel by staff members on assignment. They may not accept free or discounted transportation or accommodations unless the same discount is available to the public.

Exceptions may arise when access to a news event or source can be gained no other way. A journalist covering a military or scientific expedition, for instance, may have no reasonable method to pay for travel. Those arrangements should, however, be the exception.

Review Items

The newspaper receives countless unsolicited items, such as books, CDs and food, to review or cover. They are tantamount to press releases. Accordingly, staff members may

keep such items for reference, share them with other staff members, donate them to charity or throw them away. No staff member may sell or otherwise profit by review materials.

Items of significant value – electronic equipment, rare books, premium wine – must be returned.

Gifts

Staff members are prohibited from accepting gifts from or giving gifts to news sources, potential news sources or those who seek to influence coverage. Exceptions can be made when reporting in countries and cultures where refusing to accept or provide a modest gift would give offense. When in doubt about the appropriateness of a gift, ask a supervising editor.

Tickets and Admission

Times reporters make every effort to pay for admission to cultural events that they intend to cover.

Critics may accept free admission to events they attend in order to write reviews. Arts organizations commonly provide critics' press passes in pairs. Because a critic's appreciation of a performance or work of art is enriched by viewing and discussing it with someone else, a critic may accept the additional pass for a colleague, spouse, companion or friend with an editor's approval.

Staff members attending cultural and sporting events purely for private enjoyment may not use their affiliation with The Times to gain access or to avoid paying.

OUTSIDE WORK

The first professional duty of every Times employee is to the Los Angeles Times. Freelance work must be considered in that light, as it may at times conflict with the newspaper's interests, affect its reputation or distract staff members from their obligations to The Times.

Subject to those limitations, staff members are free to do outside creative, community or personal work, including writing articles and books, giving speeches or appearing on TV. But before accepting freelance assignments, staff members must obtain clearance from a supervisor.

The paper may deny a proposal if sensitive unpublished material gathered by The Times is likely to be shared with an outside party.

Work for organizations that compete with The Times is not permitted. In disputed cases, the editor and managing editor will determine who our competitors are.

Journalists may not work for people or organizations they cover or who are regular subjects of the paper's coverage.

The emergence of blogs has created potential quandaries for staff members who want to express themselves through that medium. No matter how careful Times bloggers might be to distinguish their personal work from their professional affiliation with the paper, outsiders are likely to see them as intertwined. As a result, any staff member who seeks to create a personal blog must clear it with a supervisor; approval will be granted only if the proposed blog meets the paper's journalistic standards. When approval is granted, staff

members should take care not to write anything in their blogs that would not be acceptable in the newspaper. Staff members should observe the same principle when contributing to blogs other than their own.

An additional word on freelancing, especially as it relates to reporting in Southern California: The entertainment industry is a central area of our coverage, and staff members must take special care not to create the appearance of conflicts should they seek work in that industry. Any screenplay or proposed movie or television deal must be disclosed to an editor before outside interest is solicited. When Hollywood agents or executives contact Times staff to discuss possible deals, those contacts should be promptly disclosed to a supervising editor.

No Times journalist who covers the entertainment industry should ever propose a script or movie idea – or any other entertainment product – to anyone working in that industry.

FREELANCERS WORKING FOR THE TIMES

The work of freelance journalists appears in our paper alongside staff-produced photos, articles and graphics. Freelancers must therefore approach their work without conflicts and must adhere to the same standards of professionalism that The Times requires of its own staff. It is the responsibility of assigning editors to inquire about a freelancer's potential conflicts of interest before making an assignment.

Conflict-of-interest provisions may apply differently to contributors to the Op-Ed pages. They are expected to bring institutional and personal perspectives to their work. They are not expected to avoid conflicts, but they are expected to disclose them.