

# EDITORIAL INTEGRITY for PUBLIC MEDIA

Principles, Policies, & Practices

UPDATED APRIL 2012

## Local Public Media Organizations **Code of Editorial Integrity**

### Introduction

Trust is the most important asset public broadcasting carries forward into its evolving public media future. Audiences rely on our information and perspectives as they make decisions in their public and personal lives. The public consistently says public television and public radio are their most trusted sources among many media choices.

Our independence is deeply rooted in American values of freedom of speech and of the press, both protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution.

The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 reinforces that independence, directing the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to protect public broadcasting entities “from interference with, or control of, program content or other activities.”

Public confidence in our organizations is strengthened by the regulations and legal requirements that accompany our FCC licenses to broadcast, our federal recognition as nonprofit educational and charitable organizations, and the federal funds that contribute to our work.

We assure the public’s continued trust by holding ourselves to rigorous voluntary standards of integrity — in how we govern our local public media organizations, produce our work, raise funds for content and operations, and comport ourselves in our communities.

Our organizations operate in a wide range of circumstances – in the communities they serve, the programming and other activities they provide, and the scale of resources with which they work.

The Code of Editorial Integrity for Local Public Media Organizations has been developed through discussions, debates, and consultations involving hundreds of executives and senior staff of public broadcasting organizations, faculty from schools of journalism, and advisers in the areas of philanthropy, community engagement, new media, and best practices for nonprofit organizations. We have benefitted from statements of editorial practices and standards, programming guidelines, and fund raising policies from public television and public radio stations across the country.

While offered as a model for all public service media, the principal focus of the Code of Editorial Integrity is the public television and public radio stations that benefit from federal support through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The principles, policies and practices of the Code define and unify an evolving field. Stations and other public media organizations will adapt and apply the Code in ways that both reflect shared values and address their unique circumstances.

We affirm our principles, policies and practices through our support of this Code of Editorial Integrity.

*February 2012*

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The Editorial Integrity Project is a collaboration of public television's Affinity Group Coalition and public radio's Station Resource Group.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting provided funding and the National Educational Telecommunications Association provided organizational support.



## Local Public Media Organizations

# Code of Editorial Integrity

Our purposes are to support a strong civil society, increase cultural access and knowledge, extend public education, and strengthen community life through electronic media and related community activities. The public's trust in our organizations, content, services, and relationships is fundamental to achieving these purposes.

We earn the public's trust through the quality and excellence of our work, the inclusion and reflection of the diversity of our communities, and a commitment to defined professional standards and practices.

We take specific steps to ascertain and understand community needs, issues, and interests; to assure respect and civility in our forums and discussions and impartiality and objectivity in our coverage of complex and controversial matters; and to be accessible, accountable, and transparent to those who use our services and the community as a whole.

Our standards apply to all the content we produce and present, regardless of subject matter, including news, science, history, information and cultural content. They apply across all the channels and platforms we use – broadcasting, online, social media, print, and in-person events.

### **GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT FOR THE COMMON GOOD**

We govern our activities in ways that promote the common good and the public interest and that reflect our commitment to integrity and trustworthiness. These obligations supersede personal and institutional agendas.

### **IDEAS, CULTURE AND FORUMS WITH RESPECT AND CIVILITY**

We contribute to the civic, educational, and cultural life of our communities by presenting a range of ideas and cultures and offering a robust forum for discussion and debate.

## **JOURNALISM THAT REPORTS EVENTS AND ISSUES WITH ACCURACY AND INTEGRITY**

We pursue facts about events and issues in our communities and other important matters that affect people's lives with accuracy and integrity.

## **INCLUSION AND REFLECTION OF OUR COMMUNITIES' DIVERSITY**

The integrity of our work is strengthened by incorporating the diversity of demography, culture, and beliefs in our communities and the nation into our work and our content.

## **TRANSPARENCY IN PROGRAM SELECTION AND CONTENT CREATION**

We share with our audiences and the public the mission-based and practical reasons for our program choices. We seek to be transparent in how we gather and report news and create other content.

## **TRANSPARENCY IN FUNDRAISING**

We aim for respectful relationships with our donors and clear understanding among donors and others about our fundraising operations. We acknowledge the sponsors of our programming and disclose the terms on which we obtain such support.

## **PREVENTING UNDUE INFLUENCE**

We assure that our editorial process is free from undue influence. We take care in deciding from whom we seek and accept funds and in setting boundaries with respect to those who contribute.

## **CONSISTENT EDITORIAL STANDARDS IN PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS**

We bring our standards into editorial partnerships and collaborations through which we expand our capacity to serve, add to the perspectives we share with our audiences, and enhance the timeliness and relevance of our work.

## **EMPLOYEE ACTIVITIES BEYOND THEIR PUBLIC MEDIA WORK**

The actions of our employees, even when "off the clock," affect public trust in our integrity, credibility, and impartiality. We expect employees to uphold our integrity in their personal as well as their professional lives.

Guidelines for Local Policies

# Code of Editorial Integrity

## GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT FOR THE COMMON GOOD

**We govern our activities in ways that promote the common good and the public interest and that reflect our commitment to integrity and trustworthiness. These obligations supersede personal and institutional agendas.**

We have a public service mission.

We make important organizational decisions in open meetings of our governing bodies, which we announce to the public in a timely fashion. We make key financial statements available to the public. The only exceptions to these provisions are in matters related to personnel, business matters of a proprietary and competitive nature, and legal matters that require confidentiality.

We assess community needs and interests to inform and guide editorial decisions and employ approaches that assure we have been inclusive of the full community and a diversity of voices, experiences, and views.

We require our decision-makers to disclose possible conflicts of interests to their colleagues, and to remove themselves from decisions where such conflicts exist.

Senior members of our professional staff are accessible to the public and information about how to contact them is available on our web site.

We regularly discuss and debate elements of this Code and other editorial and fundraising guidelines, review the success of their application in our work, and affirm and update the Code and guidelines as appropriate.

In fulfilling these commitments to accountability, we are guided by and adhere to multiple legal and regulatory frameworks within which we work. Principal among these are laws, rules, and regulations that govern the licensees of noncommercial, educational broadcast stations, federal and state policies that apply to nonprofit organizations, and requirements applied by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to organizations that benefit from the federal investment in public media.

Guidelines for Local Policies

# Code of Editorial Integrity

## IDEAS, CULTURE AND FORUMS WITH RESPECT AND CIVILITY

**We contribute to the civic, educational, and cultural life of our communities by presenting a range of ideas and cultures and offering a robust forum for discussion and debate.**

In doing this work we provide:

Public access to information, resources and opportunities for life-long education, the cultural offerings of the arts, humanities and sciences, and forums and media through which to experience a diversity of voices, experiences and views.

Citizen access to means for expressing concerns, asking questions, providing answers and sharing viewpoints and ideas in ways that are heard and respectfully considered.

Civil discourse and interaction among people with varying interests and perspectives, leading to greater shared knowledge and understanding of differences, constructive problem-solving and sustained community building.

Portions of these activities are accomplished through forums for perspectives and opinions on matters that are important to our communities, including interview programs, panel discussions, talk shows, debates, on-line discussions and similar opportunities for officials, experts, advocates, and citizens to express their views and hear the views of others.

In all these settings we strive to support a vigorous marketplace of ideas without advocating, endorsing or certifying a particular point of view.

When inviting participants, we seek people who, by reason of their expertise and experience, are able to add perspectives and insights across a broad range of views on issues of concern to our communities. From time to time, audience members may hear points of view with which they disagree.

We work to include individuals who help provide balance among the main positions on important issues, although not always in a single program, online discussion or event.

We ask participants in our forums to create a level of clarity by providing details, examples, and evidence to support their contentions. We give them opportunities to respond to criticism and seeming inconsistencies.

# Code of Editorial Integrity

## **JOURNALISM THAT REPORTS EVENTS AND ISSUES WITH ACCURACY AND INTEGRITY**

**We pursue facts about events and issues in our communities and other important matters that affect people’s lives with accuracy and integrity.**

We aim to:

Foster an informed and engaged public that, in turn, enables a strong and effective democracy.

Support individuals in making good decisions for themselves and their families and in their pursuit of a high quality of life.

We take responsibility for the validity of the content we present. We operate within a system of defined professional principles, ethics and practices in gathering data and perspectives. We are transparent about editorial decision-making processes.

### **Key principles that guide our reporting and editing**

We make every effort to assure that we are accurate. We use consistent standards and approaches in verifying the facts we present and the sources of information we use.

Whenever feasible we attribute the sources of our information. We resist anonymity, especially with respect to opinion, speculation, or personal attacks, and permit it only if we are without other means to gather compelling, verifiable information.

We place the facts we report in context. In our coverage of politics and controversial topics, we emphasize not only accuracy and full attribution, but also an impartial, non-partisan approach and attention to competing views.

We welcome comments and corrections. If we receive additional facts that add to the precision of what we present, we are committed to timely modifications or corrections.

We present a full range of views on controversial subjects – sometimes in a single story and sometimes over the course of a series of programs or set of commentaries presented in a timely fashion.

## Code of Editorial Integrity

We seek out individuals and organizations mentioned in our coverage and reports when others have made unfavorable or critical allegations about them so that they have an opportunity to respond to such assertions and our audiences are more fully informed about the controversy.

We avoid stereotyping, with particular attention to race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, and social status.

In our reporting we make a distinction between the accountability of public officials, business and non-profit leaders and others who serve the public or seek power and influence, and the greater rights and expectations of privacy for private individuals, which we endeavor to respect and protect.

We are straightforward with our audiences. When we present the work of others we say so. When we edit interviews and other material we strive to preserve the original meaning. When we process audio, video, or images electronically, we do so only to enhance clarity and not to distort meaning or mislead audiences as to how or when the content was obtained.

We tell the people and the organizations we cover who we are and what we are doing unless public or personal safety is at serious risk and this open approach will not produce vital information. We will generally avoid an undercover approach, but will disclose when we have done so.

When we make mistakes we admit and correct them, either in the same venue in which they were made, such as an on-air broadcast, in the enduring version of a report or program, such as the online version of a story or on-demand version of a program, or both.

## Code of Editorial Integrity

### **INCLUSION AND REFLECTION OF OUR COMMUNITIES' DIVERSITY**

**The integrity of our work is strengthened by incorporating the diversity of demography, culture, and beliefs in our communities and the nation into our work and our content.**

We look to the full diversity of our community as we ascertain needs and interests to which we might respond.

We assure that people with different backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences are heard and seen as both sources and subjects of our programming and are invited to participate in our activities.

We seek to create content and activities that reach and serve a diversity of people, recognizing that different programming attracts people with different values, beliefs, lifestyles, and demography.

We treat the subjects of our programming with respect. We include points of view that may not be widely shared and individuals and groups that are infrequently heard or seen outside their own communities.

## Code of Editorial Integrity

### TRANSPARENCY IN PROGRAM SELECTION AND CONTENT CREATION

**We share with our audiences and the public the mission-based and practical reasons for our program choices. We seek to be transparent in how we gather and report news and create other content.**

#### **Selecting material for broadcast and online**

We choose programs and content for broadcast and online presentation that are consistent with our overall mission and purposes. We are also guided by our public service priorities, which focus our work on particular needs and issues and on service to particular communities and audiences. Our mission statement and service priorities are published on our website.

Our content decisions are also shaped by practical considerations, such as the need for an overall coherence to our service and identity, the interests of audiences, the availability of material through other media, the costs of different kinds of programming we create, the costs of programs we acquire, and our overall resources.

We aim for public understanding of these public service and practical reasons for our decisions, especially when we make substantial changes in the direction or focus of our programming or services.

#### **Selecting stories and issues for news and public affairs programs**

Topics we cover for broadcast and online delivery are selected at regular editorial meetings of our professional staff. We welcome suggestions about what to cover and encourage comments, criticisms, and corrections of our work. We publish the names, position, and contact information for senior members of our staff on our website.

Several criteria influence topic selection, beginning with the importance to our community and the fit with our organization's public service priorities. Other factors include relevance to our audience, timeliness, potential impact, our capacity to bring something new or unique to the topic, and our ability to take on the topic or issue in a way that meets our defined editorial standards.

#### **Showing how we gather and report information**

We work to verify and authenticate the information we present in ways that are visible and understandable to the public.

## Code of Editorial Integrity

We use and cite public records, publications and databases whenever possible.

We identify the individuals or organizations that are sources of our information unless such disclosure jeopardizes the livelihood or safety of the source or it is otherwise impossible to obtain information that we believe to be newsworthy and reliable.

We identify the locations where we gather facts and from which we report.

We offer opportunities for audiences to learn more about the matters we cover through providing sources of additional information and views, such as fuller versions of interviews from which we have quoted, original documents used in our research and reporting, or places to find the views of those we consulted or considered in preparing our report.

We engage with our audiences on all these matters, including in settings in which editorial decision-makers discuss our broad principles, policies, and practices as well as specific editorial decisions with the public.

# Code of Editorial Integrity

## TRANSPARENCY IN FUNDRAISING

**We aim for respectful relationships with our donors and a clear understanding among donors and others about our fundraising operations. We acknowledge the sponsors of our programming and disclose the terms on which we obtain such support.**

Our public service depends on donations of all sizes from many different sources. We maintain the trust and confidence of these donors and our communities by making clear the purposes and uses for which we seek their support, making every effort to understand a donor's intent and, after accepting a gift, working to carry out the donor's wishes.

We inform donors about how donor records will be used. We protect personal and confidential information that we obtain during fundraising activities or through our ongoing relationships with these donors.

We are sometimes asked to exchange or rent our donor lists to other organizations. If we intend to do so, we inform donors and give them an easy means to "opt out." We do not exchange or rent donor lists to political candidates or political action committees.

We communicate directly and explicitly with donors about our editorial standards that bring rigor and integrity to our work, the legal requirements that surround our donor relationships, and the boundaries between funders and our editorial process. Within that framework, we keep donors informed about operations, welcome their suggestions and feedback, and value their role as advocates in the community.

We always disclose, on air or online as appropriate, the funders of specific programs, areas of coverage, or other activities. We acknowledge any person or organization that gives us money or other valuable consideration to broadcast specific content, as follows:

We acknowledge donors that sponsor the broadcast of a program with broadcast announcements associated with the program. We also acknowledge with broadcast announcements (providing permission is given) donors that have provided substantial general support.

## Code of Editorial Integrity

We acknowledge donors that support the production of specific programs in on-air announcements. We keep a list of these donors in a publicly available file.

We acknowledge donors that sponsor political programming or discussions of controversial issues of public importance (other than such discussions during regular news and public affairs programs) in on-air announcements. We keep a list of these donors and additional FCC-required information about the sponsors in a public file.

We do not accept anonymous gifts for the production of specific programs.

If a person or organization that has provided substantial funds to the station becomes the subject of a news story or other program, we disclose the relationship in the program or in an announcement adjacent to it, whether or not the donation was in support of the story or program.

We publish on our web site a list of funders that have provided substantial support for creation of specific programming or areas of coverage along with a brief statement of the programs or content areas the donor supports. We also publish a list of donors that have contributed substantial funds for our general support, where we have received permission to do so.

We report the overall costs of fundraising, including personnel, consultants, special events, and related support costs. This reporting is part of our overall disclosure of revenue and expenses in our public file as part of our Annual Financial Report to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

## Code of Editorial Integrity

### PREVENTING UNDUE INFLUENCE

**We assure that our editorial process is free from undue influence. We take care in deciding from whom we seek and accept funds and in setting boundaries with respect to those who contribute.**

A large and diverse group of funders supports our work, including many individuals, businesses, governmental entities, and foundations. Most of the funding and underwriting we receive supports overall operations rather than specific programs or series. A diversity of sources, the number of contributors, and the unrestricted character of funds all reinforce the independence and integrity of our editorial process.

We give careful attention to contributions and grants that support specific programs, projects, and activities. We seek to avoid both the reality and the appearance of inappropriate influence.

We reserve the right to refuse any donation for any reason, including, but not limited to, perceived conflicts of interest, potential audience misconception regarding a funder's role or influence, and perceived impact on our reputation, integrity, or fundraising ability.

We review the propriety of prospective funders on a case-by-case basis, using the framework outlined below.

#### **Funding and Underwriting for News Programming**

##### *Ongoing News and Information Programming*

We exercise close scrutiny when deciding who can fund, sponsor, or otherwise underwrite ongoing news and information programming. We are especially cautious with respect to potential funders whose principal purpose or agenda is to bring about a specific political outcome or to influence public policy on controversial matters that are the current subjects of our ongoing coverage.

We do not accept funding of ongoing news and information programming from political parties and candidates for public office.

##### *News Specials, Documentaries and other Individual Information Programs*

Even with effective safeguards that separate funders from editorial decisions, we have an obligation not to undermine our credibility by accepting support for specific programs from organizations whose participation would raise serious concern about our editorial

## Guidelines for Local Policies

# Code of Editorial Integrity

independence. This includes for-profit and non-profit organizations and governmental institutions. We therefore weigh the potential for appearance of conflict, while carefully avoiding any actual conflict. In making these assessments, we occasionally consider whether support from multiple organizations, with multiple perspectives and interests, is appropriate when funding from any one such organization, alone, would not be.

We don't accept funding that would obligate us to provide coverage of a topic that we would not have covered with general funds or that requires more extensive coverage than the topic's value or importance warrants.

### **Funding and Underwriting for Music, Arts, and Cultural Programs**

We do not accept funds for arts and cultural programs that focus on reviews and recommendations from organizations with a direct interest in the works or performances.

We occasionally consider funding from a music or cultural performing group or venue to support the presentation of performances by such groups or at such venues, depending on the answers to such questions as:

Is the performance likely to meet our standards of quality for such material?

Does the group or venue have broad community support and interest or is there another community-focused rationale for presenting the performance?

Is there an appropriate reason to accept production funding from one community arts organization while declining such funding from another?

### **Funders and Underwriters as Partners in Content Creation**

When we accept funding from an organization that will also play a role in the creation of content, we do not substitute others' editorial judgment for our own. We assure that our presentation of content produced through partnerships with funders meets our defined editorial standards. We disclose when a funder has joined us in the creation of content we present.

# Code of Editorial Integrity

## CONSISTENT EDITORIAL STANDARDS

### IN PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS

**We bring our standards into editorial partnerships and collaborations through which we expand our capacity to serve, add to the perspectives we share with our audiences, and enhance the timeliness and relevance of our work.**

We engage in ongoing efforts to build connections that deepen our knowledge of the communities we serve and our awareness of potential partners for projects.

We look for alignment in the motivation and goals of potential partners and collaborators and those of our own organization. We focus on principles, values, and practices and understand that differences in style or tone among our partners may contribute to our ability to serve the full community.

We maintain our defined editorial standards when partnering with other entities. We identify and articulate our principles, policies, and practices to all stakeholders in our partnerships and other collaborations. We require our partners to adhere to the same standards for any shared content, including transparency in the editorial process and the disclosure of content funders.

Our standards follow our content to other technologies and contexts. For example, hosting or facilitating a community discussion, town hall or forum requires editorial judgments using the same standards we apply in our broadcast or online activities.

We disclose our editorial partners and provide to the public a brief description of their and our roles and responsibilities. The form and frequency of these acknowledgements and disclosures will vary with the character of the relationship and the editorial content or activity that it produces.

Guidelines for Local Policies

# Code of Editorial Integrity

## EMPLOYEE ACTIVITIES BEYOND THEIR PUBLIC MEDIA WORK

**The actions of our employees, even when “off the clock,” affect public trust in our integrity, credibility, and impartiality. We expect employees to uphold our integrity in their personal as well as their professional lives.**

We respect the active personal lives of public media employees and their many interests, activities, and relationships. We are mindful, though, that employees’ activities beyond their public media work can affect our reputation and public trust. We therefore ask employees to integrate the principles and values of public media editorial integrity into their personal lives.

All public media employees should:

Aspire to high standards of integrity and ethics in their personal lives, including dealings with friends and associates, public behavior, and use of social media.

Be alert and sensitive to conflicts of interest between personal interests (including family members) and their professional public media responsibility.

Make a distinction between communications that are part of professional public media responsibilities and all other communications.

Exercise careful judgment about, limit, and in some cases forego, engaging in partisan activities or advocacy regarding controversial issues of public importance.

For employees with direct responsibilities for news and public affairs content, including senior staff with which ultimate editorial decisions reside:

Do not participate in partisan political activities and activities supporting, opposing, or espousing views on controversial issues of public importance. This includes running for elected office, contributing to candidates for office, participating in rallies, marches, and demonstrations, signing petitions, and displaying lawn signs and bumper stickers.

Do not participate in groups, including online groups, with agendas or activities that may give rise to real or perceived bias on matters of public interest or controversy.

Do not accept gifts, favors, and fees (including free travel or special treatment) from those with an agenda on matters of public importance or with whom it is important to preserve detachment and impartiality.

Guidelines for Local Policies

# Code of Editorial Integrity

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Code of Editorial Integrity is part of a larger initiative to advance principles, policies and practices of editorial integrity throughout public media.

In developing the Code we have drawn upon:

Association of Fundraising Professionals “Donor Bill of Rights”

BBC, “Editorial Guidelines”

The Center for Journalism Ethics, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin – Madison

Communications Act of 1934, as amended

Development Exchange, Inc. (DEI) “Gift Acceptance Policy”

Maryland Nonprofits, “Standards for Excellence Code”

National Public Radio “NPR Code of Ethics”

Public Broadcasting Service, “PBS Editorial Standards and Policies”

Society of Professional Journalists “Code of Ethics”

Discussion papers, sample editorial guidelines, and additional project documents are available at <http://pmintegrity.org>

We are grateful for support of the Editorial Integrity Project by  
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