

CODE OF ETHICS FOR JOURNALISTS

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Introduction

The Code of Ethics is a mechanism for self-regulation which aims at improving the quality of journalism and encourages a sense of responsibility among journalists in Albania.

The ethical principles of this Code are in line with the universal ethical principles of journalism, which are widely adopted and accepted by media organizations and journalism unions in democratic countries. These principles also respect the spirit of the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights.

The Role of Media in Society

Freedom of speech, freedom of information and criticism, freedom of the press, and access to official documents are basic elements of a democratic society.

The social role of media, revealed in various forms and across all platforms of communication, is extraordinarily important. The media serves as a watchdog, constantly monitoring government authorities and organizations, institutions and businesses. It plays a fundamental role in the democratic processes. The media also provides ample opportunities and a safe environment to journalists to perform their duties independently.

The media recognize and respect the diversity of opinions, opposing all discrimination based on sex, race, nationality, language, religion, ideology, culture, class or conviction, or any other reason.

The media recognize and defend both its rights and responsibilities towards the public, while constantly maintaining a balance between them.

The Scope of the Code

The following regulations concerning conduct shall apply to all persons undertaking journalistic or editorial activities.

Media, as referred to in this Code, includes all forms of communication that are intended to inform, educate, or influence the public, regardless of the format or technology used. This includes traditional outlets such as print, radio, and television, as well as digital platforms, online publications, podcasts, blogs, video channels, and social media accounts that engage in journalistic activity.

In the context of emerging technologies, media also refers to content that is partially or fully generated or curated using Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems, provided that such content is publicly disseminated and affects public understanding or discourse.

The Code of Ethics presumes and expects that all media organizations and journalists recognize and accept the principles set forth in this Code.

All those who engage in journalism are invited to acknowledge and accept the following principles as necessary to the well-being of journalism in Albania.

Journalists who violate the principles of this Code may not expect the support of their colleagues or journalism organizations, journalism trade unions, or media support organizations.

1. Accuracy and Fairness of Information

Journalists have the right to obtain information, to publish, and to criticize. Information should be truthful, balanced and verified.

Accuracy

A journalist must verify the information prior to its publication in order to ensure that it is fact-based, truthful and trustworthy. All data and information must be subject to careful scrutiny, whether it is obtained from human sources or documents.

Journalists should always indicate where information has not been verified and confirmed.

Media should not mislead the public, and they should clearly indicate where manipulated texts, documents, images and sounds have been used. In particular, they should identify any material generated by or altered by electronic systems or Artificial Intelligence.

Media shall not publish any photos, image, audio, or visual arrangements that distort the ideas or facts of the source, with the exception of caricatures, cartoons or comic plots.

Unbiased Reporting

Journalists shall strive to provide unbiased and balanced reporting.

A report is considered unbiased and balanced when a journalist refers to all sources that can provide useful information, or to all the interested parties, while avoiding false balances.

In reporting on a controversy, journalists should seek to ensure that all parties concerned have an opportunity to state their position.

A criticized party shall always have the right to respond to accusations, whenever possible in the same publication. Mere contact with both sides do not “release” a journalist from the obligation to present other sides of a story, and to report, as truthfully as possible, on a topic or an issue.

The principle of “listening to both parties” may not apply in publications representing personal opinions (editorials, opinion pieces) as well as reports of a factual nature, such as reporting on public meetings or events.

Disinformation

Journalists should avoid spreading disinformation by challenging and suppressing false information that is deliberately created and shared to cause harm.

At the same time, news media and journalists need to avoid the use of misleading content created or shared without a conscious intent to cause harm.

In particular, news media journalists shall be alert to the threat posed by online fake news, which generally refers to false digital content that may either be a form of disinformation or misinformation, depending on the source.

2. Distinguishing Fact from Opinion

The media must distinguish clearly between comments and facts. Columnist, caricaturists, and critics are allowed to present their opinions on individuals and events.

News relates to fact-based information supported by evidence, facts and data, while an opinion piece contains and represents ideas, opinions and assessments of journalists, editors and publishers.

3. Rectification and Reply

Media shall be open to engage with their audience and to deal with legitimate comments and complaints.

Media should publish a clear and appropriately prominent correction when it can be demonstrated that inaccurate or misleading information has been published, and provide an apology if necessary.

The criticized party shall always have the right to respond.

If the reply is not fit for publication as such, changes to it should be discussed with the writer. If contact cannot be made within a reasonable time, it is advisable to publish the reply in amended form. However, its essential contents must not be changed.

4. Relations with Sources

Journalists shall make all attempts to gather information from all available sources in order to be sure information is accurate, complete, and impartial.

Information shall be gathered in ethical and lawful ways. Journalists shall be transparent in their work. Subterfuge is not acceptable unless it is for reasons of security and shall be disclosed later when the time is appropriate.

People being interviewed must have the right to know in which medium and in what connection their statements will be used.

Journalists shall exercise special care in their relations with vulnerable sources, such as children, survivors of violence or minorities.

Journalists must avoid the possibility of being used in the self-interest of others, being critical in the selection of sources and making sure that the information they receive is correct.

Journalists should not divulge the name of a person who has provided information on a confidential basis, unless consent has been explicitly given by the person concerned.

The right to the anonymity may be broken only if:

- a) There is suspicion that the source consciously has distorted truth or acted in deliberate bad faith;
- b) The reference to the name of the source is the only way to avoid serious and inevitable damage to others;
- c) The information in question relates to the planning of a criminal act.

Media should not distort or misuse statements made in a specific context. In particular consideration should be shown towards vulnerable people who cannot be expected to be aware of the effect that their statements may have.

If unjustly denied access to requested information, the journalist has the right to inform the general public about it.

5. Editorial independence

Media shall avoid unacceptable conflicts of interest and shall not permit any undue influence arising from personal beliefs, political or financial incentives to affect the accurate and impartial reporting of their journalists and work of editorial departments.

Journalists, publishers, and media owners must resist threats, provocations, or incentives to influence, distort or conceal information. They shall not use any information or data collected during their work for their own personal benefit.

Editorial content should be clearly distinguished from marketing, advertisements, materials prepared by political parties or other institutions/organizations, or sponsored content. Sponsored content must clearly show the identity of the sponsor.

Commercial and political advertising, as well as sponsored content—including articles and supplements—shall be labelled accordingly to ensure the media audience can distinguish them from editorial content of the host publication.

6. Pre-publication Agreement

Journalists who agree not to publish a piece of information or material for a given period of time must respect these arrangements. Such an agreement (embargo) should be considered null and void if the information is published by another party, or when the person who requested the embargo in any way violates terms and conditions of the agreement reached.

In the interests of fairness and accuracy, journalists may show their news stories to interested parties prior to publication, but they shall not grant a veto on the right to publish and shall be free to decide for themselves on what suggestions they should take under consideration.

7. Liability after Publication

The editorial staff is liable and responsible for the publication of news articles as well as letters to the editor, comments and replies published on the media website including where the name of the author is omitted or signed under an alias.

The editorial staff should publish, for the benefit of the public, the terms and conditions for the selection and publishing of comments from the public. Media shall monitor and review such comments and take steps to ensure the terms and conditions of publication are respected.

The editorial staff has the right to add a “note” on comments and replies, or even decide not to publish them at all, with the exception of cases when it has previously promised to publish such comments. The editorial staff reserves the right to edit or shorten letters to the editor, or comments, without altering their meaning. After deciding to publish a letter to the editor or comment, it should be published within a reasonable amount of time between the moment it was submitted and the time of publication.

Where a letter or a comment contains serious accusations against a third party, the editorial staff, or the editor, should investigate whether there is any basis to these accusations. In addition, the accused party must be afforded the opportunity to respond.

It may not realistically be expected that all comments be read, edited, or rejected prior to publication. However, the editorial staff, or the editors, may delete or remove unacceptable comments from publication which have been found to be abusive, hateful, or containing malicious and unfounded allegations. Where there is a complaint that a comment includes serious accusations or insults directed at a third party, the editorial staff and the editors shall investigate whether there is any basis to such accusations, and, if so, the comment must be removed from publication.

8. Diversity

The media must not publish materials that incite hatred or violence towards individuals based on race, religion, nationality, color, ethnic origin, membership, gender, sexual orientation, civil status, disability, illness, or age or on any other ground that leads to discrimination.

Any publication should refrain from specifying the origin, ethnicity, nationality, race, religion or sexual orientation of a group or an individual, unless it is deemed necessary to better understand facts and opinions presented in the publication.

News media and journalists should develop appropriate internal guidelines and set organizational goals to maintain standards of diversity.

These standards should be reflected in editorial guidelines that reflect ethical principles of inclusive reporting and show awareness of the dangers of discrimination and all forms of stereotyping in the portrayal of minorities, migrants, refugees or vulnerable groups.

News media should ensure impartiality in their newsgathering and give voice to the opinions and viewpoints of minority groups which are the subject of news reporting.

Journalists should be aware of and seek to counteract internal bias in their reporting, whether personal or institutional, paying particular attention to the potential biases in the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) or of online sources of information.

News organizations should review and where necessary take action to improve workforce diversity and give priority to diversity in practice compared to other commercial priorities.

9. Intrusion into private life

Media and journalists shall respect the honor and reputation of individuals who become objects of their professional interest.

Any incorrect or false information that intentionally or unintentionally may cause harm to the image and reputation of another person constitutes a breach of human dignity.

A journalist must respect the right of an individual to privacy. Only the protection of the public interest can justify journalistic investigations which interfere with the private lives of individuals. Journalists shall only make reference to personal or private aspects of people's lives when they are relevant.

Journalists will use fair methods in the collection of information. They only make use of subterfuge, hidden cameras, microphones or other special equipment, or obscure their professional identity, in circumstances where:

- a) There is no other means to obtain the information concerned;
- b) The information is of urgent and serious concern to the public.

Journalists shall indicate when such methods have been used in the story or provide disclosure when circumstances permit.

The use of cameras in public or institutions should respect the desire and sensitivity of the present persons.

Public figures are entitled to less privacy than other individuals. However, information on their private lives and information related to their family and friends should be disclosed only when it serves the public interest. Public officials are also justified in not disclosing their private life except for the cases when their private life may affect their public activity.

10. Conflict of Interest

Journalists, editors and editorial managers must not seek personal gain from information and evidence collected by their media organization. Media organizations shall ensure that there are internal arrangements for the declaration of potential conflicts of interest at all levels of ownership, management and editorial activity.

Media owners, editors and journalists do not have the right to use the professional information they collect during the course of their work for any other purpose than to inform the public.

Journalists should avoid covering stories where they have a direct personal interest.

The taking of bribes or incentive of any kind in order to alter or affect their reporting, or failure to publish a piece of information, shall be considered by journalists as a serious breach of professional ethics.

11. Incitement to Crime and Violence

The propagation of war, violence, outrage or malicious information intended to injure the feelings of the whole public or parts of it is absolutely unacceptable in any media product.

Violence and brutality shall not be sensationalized. The use of explicit images of violence or inhumanity is forbidden. Reporting must take due account of the need to protect minors and vulnerable groups of the society.

Journalists and media shall not glorify crimes and terrorism or any other cruel and inhuman activities.

Media shall report with care and sensitivity issues of crime and violence and shall treat with caution the identification of victims and witnesses of crime. In cases involving sexual assault, victims shall not be identified unless they willingly give consent.

12. Reporting of accidents and disasters

Journalists shall respect the dignity of victims and their families and shall allow people to grieve in private and will report such matters with sympathy and constraint.

In the case of accidents and disasters, media shall bear in mind that rescue operations and assistance for victims and persons in jeopardy take precedence over the public's right to be informed.

Media shall not overdo pictures of catastrophes, accidents or violence that might insult the feelings of the relatives as well as the sensitiveness of the public.

Victims or missing persons shall not be identified if next-of-kin have not been informed.

13. Reporting of Court Proceedings and Presumption of Innocence

Reporting of legal proceedings (including the publication and broadcasting of images), should be accurate, fair, without prejudice, and fully respectful of the right to a fair trial.

Journalists will always respect the presumption of innocence. Media will refrain from describing someone as a criminal prior to a final court conviction.

When reporting on juvenile crime and juvenile court proceedings, media shall exercise restraint out of consideration for the future of the young people concerned. This recommendation also applies to reporting on victims of illegal human trafficking.

Media should carefully consider whether to publish facts about family scandals or remind historical crimes committed by individuals who have served their sentence.

14. Protection of Children, People with Limited Abilities and Persons with Mental Health Problems

A journalist shall respect all principles confirmed in International Conventions on the Rights of the Child and Albanian legislation on child protection, persons with limited abilities and persons with mental health problems.

A journalist protects particularly the rights and dignity of children, people with limited abilities, persons with mental health problems, including their right to be heard.

As a general rule, there is no objection to the publication of photographs and names of missing young persons but these shall only be published with the agreement of the relevant authorities or family members.

Journalists shall not take advantage of children's innocence and trust and will publish information or images about the private life of a child only if there is an overriding public interest.

Journalists shall not normally interview children under 18 on personal issues in the absence of parents or responsible persons.

15. Data Protection and Cybersecurity

Journalists must uphold ethical standards in handling digital information, ensuring the protection of sources' digital privacy and safeguarding sensitive data.

Journalists should employ secure communication channels, encrypt sensitive data when necessary, and avoid sharing information that could expose sources to harm.

Cyber exploitation, including hacking, phishing, and unauthorized data access, must be actively prevented.

Journalists have a duty to verify digital content authenticity while respecting privacy laws and ethical considerations. Media organizations should promote cybersecurity awareness and provide training to journalists on protecting themselves and their sources in the digital landscape.

16. Intellectual Property Rights

The journalist will respect authors' rights, and will encourage colleagues to respect the copyright of others in any creative area. They shall attribute information they use to its original source. Plagiarism is inadmissible.

Media and journalists abuse copyright, if they:

- a) Publish or attempt to publish the creative work of others (intellectual product) as if it was theirs (plagiarism);
- b) Quote from the work of others in such a way that they distort the original meaning, publishing distortion as reality, or wilfully indicate another person, as author;
- c) Publish as their own a topic considered as original - researched and published by someone else - without reference to the original author;
- d) Submit a single piece of work for publishing to two or more publishers at the same time - without disclosing this fact - or submit an already published work and do not draw the attention of the second publisher to this fact;

- e) Publish a work without the consent of the author, or alter the material without permission, or put it into an unworthy surrounding (composition of pictures), or a surrounding different from the previous agreement, without the consent of the author.

17. Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Journalists and news organizations may use AI systems in the gathering, production and dissemination of content while respecting the following principles:

- a) **Transparency:** Full disclosure of how AI is used and identification of published content which has been generated using AI;
- b) **Human oversight:** Decisions on the editorial use of AI and publishing of editorial content with AI will be taken by responsible journalists and editors;
- c) **Ethical safeguards:** The development and use of AI in editorial departments should ensure continuing respect for journalism ethics and professional standards;
- e) **Accountability:** AI should be subject to regular monitoring and review. Responsibility for content remains with designated editorial personnel.

18. Relations between Journalists

In their business and working relations, media and journalists should recognize the importance of fair competition and professional solidarity and maintain appropriate balance between the two.

The journalist should not act maliciously towards colleagues, impede them in the gathering of information, mislead them intentionally, or act in any other way that undermines professional solidarity.

Neither individual journalists nor separate editorial staff shall seek to use their status and role as media professionals to promote discord or disputes within the media community.

Journalists shall respect the confidentiality of personal affairs and professional secrets of editorial staff where this information is not related to violations of laws and the Code of Ethics.

Media shall respect the right of individual journalists to act according to their conscience and their right to refuse assignments, or not to be identified as the author of publications, which they believe are in contravention of the letter and spirit of this Code.

19. Public Interest

The terms of this Code provide essential and necessary guidelines for the exercise of ethical journalism and may only be disregarded in exceptional circumstances in order to serve the public interest.

Public interest is defined in these circumstances as follows:

- Matters of urgent and immediate concern to public health and safety;
- The discovery, prevention, and disclosure of serious crimes, corruption, and abuse of power;
- The prevention of circulation of information that might seriously mislead the public.

Legitimate public interest does not justify sensationalism and in the spirit of this Code it should never be confused with information that is “interesting to the public”.

20. Albanian Language

Journalists should respect and carefully observe the rules of the Albanian language. The use of foreign words should be avoided except for clarity of meaning or when appropriate in direct reporting.

