

THE DAILY TIMES

BLOUNT COUNTY'S NEWSPAPER OF RECORD SINCE 1883

OUR NEWSROOM ETHICS POLICY

Nothing is more sacred than our readers' trust in us to tell the truth, to be accurate, to be fair and to be impartial. We must avoid conflicts of interest. As journalists, we cannot simply treat these standards as bumper stickers. They must be a living truth evident in everything we say, do and print. Any failure by any one of us to follow these journalistic ideals undermines the credibility of The Daily Times as a com-

pany, of each of us as individuals, and of our craft.

What follows is a guide to help you determine what you should do as you go about your job. It does not foresee every action or situation. It simply provides guidance as you navigate journalism's journey. Any time you find yourself questioning the correct course of action, check this policy.

And when in doubt, talk to the editor.

'Seek truth and report it. Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.'

Society of Professional Journalists

NEWS GATHERING

Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent errors. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.

Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to any allegations of wrongdoing. Make multiple attempts and document each one to insert, when appropriate, in your stories.

Identify sources. Our readers are entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability. Avoid using anonymous sources without the editor's prior approval. The editor will clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. We must keep our promises.

Always question sources' motives before requesting the use of an anonymous source.

'What a newspaper needs in its news, in its headlines, and on its editorial page is terseness, humor, descriptive power, satire, originality, good literary style, clever condensation and accuracy, accuracy, accuracy.'

Joseph Pulitzer

Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is permissible, however. Label montages and photo illustrations as such.

Avoid misleading reenactments or staged news events. If reenactment is necessary to tell a story, label it as such.

Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information. Always identify yourself and your affiliation.

Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it might be unpopular and cost us readers.

Examine our own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.

Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.

Support the open exchange of views, even when you find them repugnant.

Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.

Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.

Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two. Paid advertisements should be labeled as such and should not resemble news reports.

Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection. Routinely file open records requests.

Correct errors immediately, both in the newspaper and online. Errors that appear on section fronts should be corrected on those fronts.

PLAGIARISM

IT'S A SIMPLE POLICY: DON'T.

If respecting the intellectual property of your fellow journalists isn't a strong enough reason to stop you from stealing their work, consider this: If you thought a

sentence was funny, clever or cute enough to steal, someone else probably thought it was pretty good, too. In the Google age, it can take just seconds to catch you stealing someone else's work.

Sometimes when a reporter is "matching" a story from another source, he or she can accidentally copy a sentence or phrase without realizing it. To prevent this problem, it can never hurt to add

"information from The Washington Post was used in this report." It takes only seconds, and it helps cover any inadvertent copying you might have done.

POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

We support your voting rights. However, because media companies are expected to be nonpartisan, the conduct of employees is subject to special scrutiny and criticism. Journalists must refrain from participating in active partisan politics.

Active partisan politics includes:

Active support of candidates for public office.

Service as a delegate to political conventions and as a member of party committees or candidates' committees.

Signing endorsements of candidates.

Running as a candidate for public office.

Endorsing, recommending or participating in any organization whose primary purpose is to advance a politically sensitive cause.

Donating to any candidate or public issue up for a vote.

News employees must not seek elected office or serve in a leadership capacity with any political party.

Journalists should never display yard signs or bumper stickers, or wear buttons in support of any candidate – federal, state or local. Likewise, journalists should never work in the campaign of any candidate or carry or sign petitions in support of any cause. Because of the potential appearance of impropriety, employees should use care when donating to any group that might be perceived as political or when attending any rally or event with political overtones. If your spouse chooses to sport such a bumper sticker on his or her car, find another ride.

PAYING OUR WAY

If the "public's right to know" is truly the highest and only interest journalists at our newspaper strive to serve, then journalists must reject all gifts, services and food offered by sources or organizations in the community that are not available to the general public.

The only exception is at sporting events; working press may consume food and drinks in areas set aside for journalists.

NO FREEBIES

Turning down free goodie bags and meals should be obvious. Refusing complimentary rounds of golf during a course review or rejecting meals on the house during a restaurant review should be standard practice. The Daily Times will cover the costs of meals and movies for review purposes. "I don't know how many times I've heard from journalists that 'I can't be bought for a meal.' Which, of course, begs the question: What could you be bought for," said Aly Colon of the

'Journalists should be free of any interest other than the public's right to know.'

Society of Professional Journalists

Poynter Institute. "A Mercedes-Benz? An all-expense paid trip to Disney World? A free trip to Tuscany? Or even a wine company-sponsored trip to the California vineyards?"

PRIVATE CITIZENS

Things get more complicated, however, when private citizens offer gifts. Is it better to accept a cup of coffee from a source during an interview at her home and not appear rude, or reject the coffee on the grounds of staying ethically neutral? What about if during the course of covering a county commission meeting a cake is brought out to celebrate the retirement of a secretary? Should a journalist automatically reject the cake because it is from a government official, or should she eat a small piece along with

everyone else at the meeting in honor of the secretary? In these cases, perhaps the standard should be: If you can eat it standing up, feel free to accept it. Thus a cup of coffee, a glass of water or a small piece of cake would be acceptable – especially if rejecting the offer could be construed as rude. This policy, however, should not be stretched to the point of giving you license to eat entire meals by claiming you can balance your plate on one hand and eat a steak dinner standing up.

NON-FOOD GIFTS

All other non-food gifts should be rejected if they are not directly related to performing your job. Thus, a free program from a play would be acceptable since the reviewer needs to know how to spell a name properly. A note-

book with Kurt Busch on the cover should not be accepted. We'll supply all the notebooks you'll ever need. If a company sends free gifts through the mail, the reporter should donate the items to charity.

REVIEW ITEMS, SERVICES, TRAVEL

Free items such as CDs, DVDs or video games that are needed for reviewing purposes may be accepted for the purpose of writing the review and then submitted to charity. Items that are not reviewed should be donated to charity. The same rules apply to services and travel. Unless the hair salon is giving free pedicures to every one, journalists should not accept free or reduced services. Journalists also should reject all discounts. There is no ethical reason for a writer to pay less for a Callaway driver than a lawyer. Airline discounts and free hotel rooms also should be rejected when traveling out of town to cover an event. If the paper won't pay full price to cover something, then it won't get covered.

MEMBERSHIP IN CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS

Journalists can be an active part of their community, but we should be aware of some pitfalls. We are asked to remain neutral on community issues, but the community is our home, and we can't help but have our opinions. We should declare any conflicts that arise.

A Rotary club member should not cover the meeting. And don't accept the post of publicity chairman in that or any other club.

Be careful about joining organizations, especially if it is related to your beat. The theater reviewer should not be a member of a local theater, no matter how much he or she wants to be on stage.

Don't take a stand on issues in the area you cover. It's fine to join a church, but don't report on a controversy in the church in which you belong. Stay away from being involved in religious lobbying organizations.

Let common sense guide you

when petitions come your way – don't sign them. Don't donate to fundraisers with hot agendas or political parties. Working with a nonprofit group such as Goodwill is fine, but remember to exclude yourself from any capacity that has to do with writing, layout or placement of that story on a page.

'You, as the leader, walk and talk your newsroom's values.'

Jill Geisler
Poynter Institute

Don't purchase stock in a local company, especially if you are a financial reporter or editor, or in any company you might have to cover if a controversy arises.

Don't exploit your connection to the newspaper by using threats, for example, to resolve a utility billing error.

Be careful what you say in public and even out in the newsroom

about an organization, a political candidate or even a reader who may be a constant complainer. Even staff from other departments might walk through at the time we are venting about a particular source.

Also, keep in mind to be careful about the signs, calendars or pictures around our desks. Members of the public pass through our newsroom, and we don't want to send the message that we could be biased. Even staff from other departments can overhear us venting. Go into a closed office and vent away.

Even during off hours, journalists should be careful about the message they send to the public. Wearing a T-shirt poking fun at a community controversy or even a bumper sticker taking a stand on an issue can send the wrong message.

A good idea is to stop and think twice. Stand back and look at what you are about to do, wear and say. Ask yourself: Will this

tarnish the credibility of the newspaper?

Most answers are common sense; if not, just ask your co-workers. Get a consensus, ask your editor and don't let something come back to haunt you. Once lost, it's very difficult to regain readers' trust or restore credibility to the newspaper. Be a leader. Jill Geisler, leadership management leader at the Poynter Institute, offers this: "Think about your newsroom's email exchanges or your off-hand conversations about people and subjects you cover. What's the tone? Is there sniping? Smart-aleck comments? Nonstop cynicism? Think again: What impression might someone take away from that reading? Would this kind of transparency reveal the perception or reality of bias? Or might it broadcast your journalistic professionalism to even the most skeptical eye? You, as the leader, walk and talk your newsroom's values."

PHOTOGRAPHY

With new technology available to photojournalists, alteration of photographs is a major ethics violation.

However, minor dodging and burning or color correction of areas in the photograph that do not change the content are acceptable. Correcting or removing dirt or dust spots may be done. Adding or removing elements that do not realistically represent what the camera captured is forbidden.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY AMANDA GREEVER | ORIGINAL PHOTO TOM SHERLIN | THE DAILY TIMES

APPROPRIATE SUBJECT MATTER

On occasion, the subject matter of a photograph may require discussion – for example, photographs with the potential to offend community standards through the inclusion of nudity, obscene gestures or offensive cultural elements. Photographs that may offend community standards include dead bodies, gruesome or emotionally distressing photographs.

A photograph that has been manipulated (electronically or otherwise) **MUST** be labeled as a photo illustration (meaning the photo was set up) or as an electronically manipulated photo (example: removing or creating elements in the illustration). Credit the designer and then note the photographer who shot the original photo.

Overall, the photographer should be accurate and comprehensive in the representation of subjects, and should not intentionally con-

tribute to, or seek to alter or influence events that are being photographed. Photographs should not be staged.

CONNECTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

News employees are encouraged to participate in the community through volunteer work, membership in civic organizations and the like. However, participation in the community carries the potential of conflict of interest, or more to the point, the appearance of conflict of interest.

No newsroom employee will be assigned to write a story, take photographs, edit material, write a headline, design a page or make news judgments related to an organization he or she may belong to or actively participate in, nor should he or she accept such an assignment. The exception may be made if a) the story/photo/page is deemed purely informational and entirely uncontroversial by the editor; b) if the relationship between the employee and the organization is transitory; or c) emergency circumstances require temporary suspension.

No newsroom employee will take a leadership role in any organiza-

tion about which he or she potentially may be pressed to make an editorial judgment.

No newsroom employee will perform public relations duties for any organization.

Any news staff member who has a close relative, close friend or someone with whom he or she has a romantic involvement who is either running for office or working on a campaign will not be assigned to cover the story.

No newsroom employee will be assigned to write, photograph, report, edit material or make news judgments related to an organization, company or individual with which he or she has a direct financial relationship, nor should he or she accept such an assignment. A direct financial relationship would include employment, whether full time, part time, contract, freelance or direct investment of stocks, etc.

No employee should directly

invest in any corporation, company or entity that he or she covers or is likely to cover, and no employee should be assigned to cover any corporation, company or entity that he or she has directly invested in. "Directly invest" should be taken to mean the intentional investment in a specific company, not investment in a mutual fund. Specifically exempted from this rule is coverage of The Daily Times and its associated properties, regardless of investment.

Newsroom employees will disclose any and all outside employment, regardless of status (full time, part time, contract, freelance or other) to the editor.

No newsroom employee will perform work for a direct competitor.

Newsroom employees should not be assigned to write, photograph, report or edit material or make news judgments about friends or family members or about any organizations that those friends

and family members are active in, nor should employees accept such an assignment.

Should an employee's family member decide to undertake a course that could lead to a real or perceived conflict, the employee will immediately bring it to the attention of the editor. Examples would include the spouse's intention to run for office or accept a position that could pose a conflict, post a political sign, etc.

Don't look for another job while on the clock. If offered a job by the city, school or another business, the reporter should let an editor know.

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

If a newsroom employee feels uncomfortable about a potential conflict situation involving either that employee or another, he or she should inform the editor privately about those concerns. The editor will be the arbiter of whether a situation poses the risk of appearing to the general public to be a conflict of interest.

Should circumstances force the temporary suspension of a portion of this policy with the permission of the editor – such as only one reporter, photographer or editor being available for a breaking news event – the newspaper will include a disclaimer as an editor's note at the end of the story: "In the interest of full disclosure, we note that reporter Jane Doe is a member of The Goose Pimple Junction Quilting Guild."

In the event of a major suspension of the policy, reflecting a greater concern that a conflict of interest may be seen by the public, the editor may decide to a) place the editor's note at

or near the beginning of the story; or b) write a longer explanation of the situation to use as a news drop-in.

All newsroom employees are expected to disclose potential conflicts to the editor.

In the event of a potential non-newsroom conflict of interest, an editor's note will be published or a paragraph inserted in the story explaining the situation and the potential conflict. An example would be if the Goose Pimple Junction Exponent were sold to Gannett after a major bidding battle with Adams Publishing Group. Any story about that sale should include a paragraph or an editor's note that Adams also was involved in negotiations for the purchase of the Goose Pimple Junction Exponent.

Staff members should not write about, photograph, illustrate or make news judgments

about family members, friends or close associates. Columns or a writer's story being told in the first person would be obvious exceptions.

Staff members should notify a department head about friendships or relationships that could be a conflict of interest. The intent is not to limit an employee's personal life but to resolve potential conflicts. When in doubt and whenever situations arise, consult with the editor. In summary, we are to put ethics on the same plane as accuracy and fairness. If you have any doubts over whether an action blurs the lines of ethics, then see the editor.

The Daily Times is a long-time partner with The Empty Pantry Fund and A Secret Safe Place for Newborns of Tennessee. Editors will provide shirttail or editor's note copy when it is relevant to make clear to readers that relationship.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites have become an integral part of daily life for millions of people, as well as a powerful reporting tool. The Daily Times supports social networking as a personal and professional tool, but expects employees to consider how their actions might reflect on the newspaper. As we participate on social networking sites, even for personal use, we have to preserve the TDT's reputation for fairness and impartiality. Just as a journalist wouldn't yell his or her opinion to 200 people at the movie theater, it's not OK to broadcast your views on politics and issues we cover to hundreds of friends or followers online. Anything we say (or write, or post) potentially reflects upon the TDT, even if it's said in a personal venue.

Even when using personal social media sites, be careful not to post political opinions or even strong opinions on anything that could affect your credibility as a journalist.

Do not share any internal The Daily Times information that is confidential and proprietary, including stories in the works (we don't want to tip off our competitors).

Be honest and fair. Never post anything you would not want your mother to see. Consider whether you would be comfortable with The New York Times publishing your comment and attributing it to you.

Be aware of your association with the TDT in online social networks. If you identify yourself as a TDT journalist, ensure that your profile and related content are consistent with how you wish to present yourself to colleagues, readers and those we cover.

Don't use ethnic slurs, personal insults or obscenity, or engage in any conduct that would not be acceptable in the TDT workplace. You also should show proper consider-

ation for others' privacy and for topics that may be considered objectionable or inflammatory, such as politics and religion.

Refrain from posting comments or links related to advocacy or a special interest regarding topics you cover or issues the newspaper covers.

It is OK to like or follow a page of an organization you cover for the purpose of monitoring posts/Tweets and gathering information. Be balanced when you like or follow people or organizations for work purposes. For example, if you like/follow Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan, then also like/follow Democratic Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi.

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICIES AT OTHER NEWSPAPERS

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

"Employees should be mindful that any personal information they disclose about themselves or colleagues may be linked to the Associated Press' name. That's true even if staffers restrict their pages to viewing only by friends. It's not just like uttering a comment over a beer with your friends: It's all too easy for someone to copy material out of restricted pages and redirect it elsewhere for wider viewing. As multitudes of people have learned all too well, virtually nothing is truly private on the Internet.

THE WASHINGTON POST

"All Washington Post journalists relinquish some of the personal privileges of private citizens. Post journalists must recognize that any content associated with them in an online social network is, for practical purposes, the equivalent of what appears beneath their bylines in the newspaper or on our website.

What you do on social networks should be presumed to be publicly available to anyone, even if you have created a private account. It is possible to use privacy controls online to limit access to sensitive information. But such controls are only a deterrent, not an absolute insulator. Reality is simple: If you don't want something to be found online, don't put it there."

EDITOR'S NOTE: In preparing this document, we have borrowed frequently from the standards and practices of many other institutions and newspapers, including the Society of Professional Journalists, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Associated Press Managing Editors and the Poynter Institute.