

PRINT MEDIA GUIDELINES

PREAMBLE

The print media in Ghana have a long, albeit checkered history and tradition of press freedoms and responsibilities dating back to 1822. Until recently, they largely operated without written codes or guidelines. Whereas the 1992 Constitution guarantees the freedom and independence of the media, and forbids censorship in Ghana, it also enjoins the National Media Commission “to take all appropriate measures to ensure the highest journalistic standards”. The Print Media Guidelines have, therefore, been prepared by the Commission to help the press balance freedom of expression and the public right to know with individual rights and matters of national or public interest.

All persons working in the press are urged to respect and honour both the letter and spirit of these guidelines.”

1. ACCURACY AND FAIRNESS

- a. The Press has a fundamental duty to seek and publish the truth. Journalists should be honest, fair and factual in gathering, reporting, interpreting and publishing information.
- b. The Press should take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted material, including pictures, data and graphics.
- c. Whenever it is recognized that an inaccurate, misleading statement or distorted report has been published, it should be corrected promptly and with due prominence. An apology must be published whenever appropriate.
- d. Accuracy and fairness can best be achieved by avoiding deliberate distortion, by attempting to get information from diverse sources and by diligently seeking out subjects of news stories to give them an opportunity to respond to allegations and misrepresentations.
- e. The Press is free to be partisan. However, facts must be distinguished from comments and conjecture.
- f. Analysis and commentary should be distinguished from straight news reports and not represented as fact.
- g. The Press must avoid misleading headlines, news teasers, promotional materials and quotations.
- h. Direct quotes, delineated by quote marks, must be distinguished from paraphrased speech. The Press must ensure that when quoting people directly their exact words are reproduced in the original language.

2. SOURCES

- a. It is important to identify sources as often as is feasible; the public is entitled to as much information as possible on a source's reliability.
- b. Whenever confidentiality is required and negotiated journalists must respect the terms.
- c. Journalists must always question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Journalists must be wary of sources offering information for favours or money.
- d. The Press must recognize a special obligation that in nurturing Ghana's democracy public business must be conducted in the open and journalists must insist that government records are open to inspection.

3. RIGHT OF REPLY

The Constitution guarantees a right to rejoinder. In discharging this responsibility journalists must ensure that replies are responsive and in proportion to the prominence given the original article as specified by the NMC *Guidelines on Publication of Rejoinder*.

4. NEWS GATHERING

- a. As a general rule, journalists must not use, or publish materials obtained by subterfuge; using clandestine devices such as hidden cameras and hidden tape-recorders. Such activity may, however, be justifiable in special circumstances such as detecting and inspecting crime sites or protecting public health and safety.
- b. Payments must not be made to criminals for their stories or other criminal activities.
- c. It is unacceptable to ask for payment for covering and writing a news story.
- d. Journalists must distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.

5. HARASSMENT

Journalists and photographers must neither obtain nor seek to obtain information or pictures through intimidation, harassment or blackmail. This includes persistent telephoning, pursuing, following or photographing individuals after having been asked to desist, or remaining on their property after having been asked to leave.

6. PRIVACY

- a. There must be respect for private life. A person is entitled to privacy in their home, and in matters such as health and correspondence. It is unacceptable to use long-lens camera and recording devices without the consent of news subjects and to intrude in places where there should be reasonable expectation of privacy.

- b. The Press must recognize that private individuals have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power or command influence or attention.

7. PROTECTION OF THE VULNERABLE

7.1 Children:

- a. It is unacceptable to interview or photograph a child on subjects involving the welfare of the child or any other child in the absence of, or without the consent of, a parent or other adult who is responsible for the child.
- b. A child must be protected from unnecessary intrusion, and must not be approached or photographed at school without the permission of school authorities.
- c. Children deserve privacy irrespective of the status of their parents. Where material about the private life of a child is published, there must be justification for publication other than the fame, notoriety or position of his or her parents or guardian.
- d. A child must not be enticed with money or any other inducement for information that will compromise their welfare.
- e. The press must not identify children who are involved in cases concerning sexual offences, whether as victims, suspects or as witnesses.
- f. The word "incest" must not be used where a child victim might be identified. Care must be taken such that nothing in the report identifies the relationship between the accused and the child.
- g. Adult victims of sexual abuse, or crime, either male or female, should not be named without their consent.

7.2 Grief

- a. In cases involving bereavement, personal grief or shock, the Press must show compassion. Publication must be handled sensitively at such times.
- b. Special sensitivity should be shown when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects affected by tragedy.

7.3 Patients

- a. Journalists or photographers making enquires at hospitals or similar institutions should identify themselves to responsible officials and obtain permission before entering designated non-public areas.
- b. The Press must remember that restrictions on intrusion are particularly relevant to enquiries about individuals in hospitals or similar institutions.

8. REPORTING CRIME

- a. A balance must be struck between a suspect's right to a fair trial and the public's right to be informed, bearing in mind that suspects are innocent until proven guilty.
- b. The Press must be judicious in naming criminal suspects and photographing them before the formal filing of charges.
- c. Journalists must be careful about interviewing suspects and accused persons since some of them may incriminate themselves.
- d. Suspects and accused persons should be identified as such until they have been convicted of the crime.
- e. The Press must avoid identifying relatives or friends of persons suspected, accused and convicted of crime without their consent.
- f. Particular regard should be paid to the potentially vulnerable position of children who are witnesses to, or victims of crime.

9. VIOLENCE

- a. Violence must not be exploited in press publications. As much as possible coverage and reportage of violence should be warranted and should not be undertaken for shock effect or for trivial reasons.
- b. In cases where there is civil disorder or civil violence, every precaution must be taken to ensure that the presence of journalists on the scene of the event and publications on the event[s] do not provoke or inflame the situation.
- c. To this end, journalists are advised to:
 - i. Assume low profile if their presence is evidently inspiring a potentially dangerous situation;
 - ii. Be wary of persons and groups who are clearly performing for the press;
 - iii. Avoid making suggestions or requests to participants, which would lead to any form of staging.

10. DISASTERS

News, views or comments relating to communal or religious disputes/clashes should be published after proper verification of facts, and should be presented with due caution and restraint in a manner which is conducive to the creation of an atmosphere congenial to communal harmony, amity and peace.

11. DISCRIMINATION

- a. The Press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to a person's race, ethnicity, colour, religion, gender or to any physical or mental illness or disability.
- b. The Press must not originate material, which encourages discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, colour, religion, gender, physical illness or disability.

12. PHOTOGRAPHS

- a. Photographs must be used tastefully so as not to offend public sensibilities. The Press must be circumspect in using graphic pictures of tragedies so as not to contribute to the pain of victims and the bereaved.
- b. The Press must not distort the content of news photographs. Image enhancement for technical clarity is permissible but not manipulations that mislead readers.

13. LANGUAGE

Journalists must avoid using obscene, hateful and vulgar language. Journalists must avoid expletives and swear words.

14. FINANCIAL JOURNALISM

- a. Even where the law does not prohibit it, journalists must not use for their own profit financial information they receive in advance of its general publication, nor should they pass such information on to others.
- b. Journalists must not write about the performance of securities in which they and/or their close family members have an interest.

15. COPYRIGHT/PLAGIARISM

- a. Journalists must not appropriate the work of others as their own.
- b. Where the work of others is used, it must be identified as such and appropriately credited or bylined.

16. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

- a. Journalists must avoid conflict of interest, real or perceived, especially in financial issues.
- b. Journalists must disclose all instances of conflict of interest.

17. MISCELLANEOUS

- a. Journalists must support the open exchange of views, even if they disagree with them.
- b. Journalists must avoid suppression of information unless it borders on national security or it is in the public interest.
- c. Public interest is difficult to define but it is generally taken to include any matter of social and legitimate public concern, i.e.
 - i. Detecting or exposing crime or a serious misdemeanour
 - ii. Protecting public health and safety
 - iii. Preventing the public from being misled by some statement or action of an individual or organisation.
- d. Journalists must abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.
- e. Journalists must give voice to the voiceless, noting that official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.