

# Reporting on War in the 21st Century

## Handout #3 The New York Times: Guidelines on Our Integrity

*from American Society of Newspaper Editors*

<http://www.asne.org/ideas/codes/newyorktimesintegrity.htm>

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The New York Times

Guidelines on Our Integrity

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Reporters, editors, photographers and all members of the news staff of The New York Times share a common and essential interest in protecting the integrity of the newspaper. As the news, editorial and business leadership of the newspaper declared jointly in 1998: "Our greatest strength is the authority and reputation of The Times. We must do nothing that would undermine or dilute it and everything possible to enhance it."

At a time of growing and even justified public suspicion about the impartiality, accuracy and integrity of some journalists and some journalism, it is imperative that The Times and its staff maintain the highest possible standards to insure that we do nothing that might erode readers' faith and confidence in our news columns. This means that staff members should be vigilant in avoiding any activity that might pose an actual or apparent conflict of interest and thus threaten the newspaper's ethical standing. And it also means that the journalism we practice daily must be beyond reproach.

No one needs to be reminded that falsifying any part of a news report cannot be tolerated and will result automatically in disciplinary action up to and including termination. But in a climate of increased scrutiny throughout the news business, these further guidelines are offered, to resolve questions that sometimes arise about specific practices:

**Quotations.** Readers should be able to assume that every word between quotation marks is what the speaker or writer said. The Times does not "clean up" quotations. If a subject's grammar or taste is unsuitable, quotation marks should be removed and the awkward passage paraphrased. Unless the writer has detailed notes or a recording, it is usually wise to paraphrase long comments, since they may turn up worded differently on television or in other publications. "Approximate" quotations can undermine readers' trust in The Times.

The writer should, of course, omit extraneous syllables like "um" and may judiciously delete false starts. If any further omission is necessary, close the quotation, insert new attribution and begin another quotation. (The Times does adjust spelling, punctuation, capitalization and abbreviations within a quotation for consistent style.) Detailed guidance is in the stylebook entry headed "quotations." In every case, writer and editor must both be satisfied that the intent of the subject has been preserved.

**Other People's Reporting.** When we use facts gathered by any other organization, we attribute them. This policy applies to material from newspapers, magazines, books and broadcasts, as well as news agencies like The Associated Press (for example, "the Senator told The Associated Press"). In other words, even though The AP is a co-op and we are members, we do not treat its reporting as our own. When writing from a pool report, if we have not witnessed the events, we attribute them to the pool reporter. In a roundup, we may use a phrase like "reports from news agencies and New York Times bureaus."

Our preference, when time and distance permit, is to do our own reporting and verify another organization's story; in that case, we need not attribute the facts. But even then, as a matter of courtesy and candor, we credit an exclusive to the organization that first broke the news.

Attribution to another publication, though, cannot serve as license to print rumors that would not meet the test of The Times's own reporting standards. Rumors must satisfy The Times's standard of newsworthiness, taste and plausibility before publication, even when attributed. And when the need arises to attribute, that is a good cue to consult with the department head about whether publication is warranted at all.

In those cases when it makes a difference whether we directly witnessed a scene, we should distinguish in print between personal interviews and telephone or E-mail interviews, as well as written statements.

**Fact Checking.** Writers at The Times are their own principal fact checkers and often their only ones. (Magazine articles, especially those by nonmembers of our staff, are fact-checked, but even magazine writers are accountable in the first instance for their own accuracy.) Concrete facts - distances, addresses, phone numbers, people's titles - must be verified by the writer with standard references like telephone books, city or legislative directories and official Web sites. More obscure checks may be referred to the research desk. If deadline pressure requires skipping a check, the editors should be alerted with a flag like "desk, please verify," but ideally the writer should double back for the check after filing; usually the desk can accommodate a last-minute repair. It is especially important that writers verify the spelling of names, by asking. A person who sees his or her own name misspelled in The Times is likely to mistrust whatever else we print. And too often, our correction column makes it clear that someone has guessed a spelling by the sound.

**Corrections.** Because our voice is loud and far-reaching, The Times recognizes an ethical responsibility to correct all its factual errors, large and small. The paper regrets every error, but it applauds the integrity of a writer who volunteers a correction of his or her own published story. Whatever the origin, though, any complaint should be relayed to a responsible supervising editor and investigated quickly. If a correction is warranted, fairness demands that it be published immediately. In case of reasonable doubt or disagreement about the facts, we can acknowledge that a statement was "imprecise" or "incomplete" even if we are not sure it was wrong.

**Rebuttals.** Few writers need to be reminded that we seek and publish a response from anyone criticized in our pages. But when the criticism is serious, we have a special obligation to describe the scope of the accusation and let the subject respond in detail. No subject should be taken by surprise when the paper appears, or feel that there was no chance to respond.

**Anonymity and Its Devices.** The use of unidentified sources is reserved for situations in which the newspaper could not otherwise print information it considers newsworthy and reliable. When possible, reporter and editor should discuss any promise of anonymity before it is made, or before the reporting begins on a story that may result in such a commitment. (Some beats, like criminal justice or national security, may carry standing authorization for the reporter to grant anonymity.) The stylebook discusses the forms of attribution for such cases: the general rule is to tell readers as much as we can about the placement and known motivation of the source. While we avoid automatic phrases about a source's having "insisted on anonymity," we should try to state tersely what kind of understanding was actually reached by reporter and source, especially when we can shed light on the source's reasons. The Times does not dissemble about its sources - does not, for example, refer to a single person as "sources" and does not say "other officials" when quoting someone who has already been cited by name. There can be no prescribed formula for such attribution, but it should be literally truthful, and not coy.

**Fictional Devices.** No reader should find cause to suspect that the paper would knowingly alter facts. For that reason, The Times refrains outright from assigning fictional names, ages, places or dates, and it strictly limits

the use of other concealment devices.

If compassion or the unavoidable conditions of reporting require shielding an identity, the preferred solution is to omit the name and explain the omission. (That situation might arise, for example, in an interview conducted inside a hospital or a school governed by privacy rules.) If a complex narrative must distinguish among several shielded identities, it may be necessary to use given names with last initials or, less desirable, given names alone (Hilary K.; Ashley M.; Terry). Descriptions may serve instead (the lawyer; the Morristown psychotherapist). As a rare last resort, if genuine given names would be too revealing, real or coined single initials (Dr. D, Ms. L) may be used after consultation with senior editors. The article must gracefully indicate the device and the reason.

Masquerading. Times reporters do not actively misrepresent their identity to get a story. We may sometimes remain silent on our identity and allow assumptions to be made - to observe an institution's dealings with the public, for example, or the behavior of people at a rally or police officers in a bar near the station house. But a sustained, systematic deception, even a passive one - taking a job, for example, to observe a business from the inside - may be employed only after consultation between a department head and masthead editors. (Obviously, specific exceptions exist for restaurant reviewing and similar assignments.)

Photography and Images. Images in our pages that purport to depict reality must be genuine in every way. No people or objects may be added, rearranged, reversed, distorted or removed from a scene (except for the recognized practice of cropping to omit extraneous outer portions). Adjustments of color or gray scale should be limited to those minimally necessary for clear and accurate reproduction, analogous to the "burning" and "dodging" that formerly took place in darkroom processing of images. Pictures of news situations must not be posed. In the cases of collages, montages, portraits, fashion or home design illustrations, fanciful contrived situations and demonstrations of how a device is used, our intervention should be unmistakable to the reader, and unmistakably free of intent to deceive. Captions and credits should further acknowledge our intervention if the slightest doubt is possible. The design director, a masthead editor or the news desk should be consulted on doubtful cases or proposals for exceptions.

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