

Handout #4: *The Washington Post's Code of Ethics*
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The Washington Post Standards and Ethics

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Standards and Ethics

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The Washington Post is pledged to an aggressive, responsible and fair pursuit of the truth without fear of any special interest, and with favor to none.

Washington Post reporters and editors are pledged to approach every assignment with the fairness of open minds and without prior judgment. The search for opposing views must be routine. Comment from persons accused or challenged in stories must be included. The motives of those who press their views upon us must routinely be examined, and it must be recognized that those motives can be noble or ignoble, obvious or ulterior.

We fully recognize that the power we have inherited as the dominant morning newspaper in the capital of the free world carries with it special responsibilities:

to listen to the voiceless
to avoid any and all acts of arrogance
to face the public politely and candidly

A. Conflict of Interest

This newspaper is pledged to avoid conflict of interest or the appearance of conflict of interest, wherever and whenever possible. We have adopted stringent policies on these issues, conscious that they may be more restrictive than is customary in the world of private business. In particular:

We pay our own way.

We accept no gifts from news sources. We accept no free trips. We neither seek nor accept preferential treatment that might be rendered because of the positions we hold. Exceptions to the no-gift rule are few and obvious – invitations to meals, for example. Free admissions to any event that is not free to the public are prohibited. The only exception is for seats not sold to the public, as in a press box. Whenever possible, arrangements will be made to pay for such seats.

We work for no one except The Washington Post without permission from supervisors. Many outside activities and jobs are incompatible with the proper performance of work on an independent newspaper. Connections with government are among the most objectionable. To avoid real or apparent conflicts of interest in the coverage of business and the financial markets, all members of the Business and Financial staff are required to disclose their financial holdings and investments to the assistant managing editor in charge of the section. The potential for conflict, however, is not limited to members of the Business and Financial staff. All reporters and editors, wherever they may work, are required to disclose to their department head any financial interests that might be in conflict or give the appearance of a conflict in their reporting or editing duties. Department heads will make their own financial disclosures to the managing editor.

We freelance for no one and accept no speaking engagements without permission from department heads. Permission to

freelance will be granted only if The Washington Post has no interest in the story and only if it is to appear in a medium that does not compete with The Post. It is important that no freelance assignments and no honoraria be accepted that might in any way be interpreted as disguised gratuities.

We make every reasonable effort to be free of obligation to news sources and to special interests. We must be wary of entanglement with those whose positions render them likely to be subjects of journalistic interest and examination. Our private behavior as well as our professional behavior must not bring discredit to our profession or to The Post.

We avoid active involvement in any partisan causes – politics, community affairs, social action, demonstrations – that could compromise or seem to compromise our ability to report and edit fairly. Relatives cannot fairly be made subject to Post rules, but it should be recognized that their employment or their involvement in causes can at least appear to compromise our integrity. The business and professional ties of traditional family members or other members of your household must be disclosed to department heads.

B. The Reporter's Role

Although it has become increasingly difficult for this newspaper and for the press generally to do so since Watergate, reporters should make every effort to remain in the audience, to stay off the stage, to report the news, not to make the news.

In gathering news, reporters will not misrepresent their identity. They will not identify themselves as police officers, physicians or anything other than journalists.

C. Errors

This newspaper is pledged to minimize the number of errors we make and to correct those that occur. Accuracy is our goal; candor is our defense. Persons who call errors to our attention must be accorded a respectful hearing. See Chapter 3, "The Role of the Ombudsman."

D. Attribution of Sources

The Washington Post is pledged to disclose the source of all information when at all possible. When we agree to protect a source's identity, that identity will not be made known to anyone outside The Post.

Before any information is accepted without full attribution, reporters must make every reasonable effort to get it on the record. If that is not possible, reporters should consider seeking the information elsewhere. If that in turn is not possible, reporters should request an on-the-record reason for concealing the source's identity and should include the reason in the story.

In any case, some kind of identification is almost always possible – by department or by position, for example – and should be reported.

No pseudonyms are to be used.

However, The Washington Post will not knowingly disclose the identities of U.S. intelligence agents, except under highly unusual circumstances which must be weighed by the senior editors.

E. Plagiarism and Credit

Attribution of material from other newspapers and other media must be total. Plagiarism is one of journalism's unforgivable sins. It is the policy of this newspaper to give credit to other publications that develop exclusive stories worthy of coverage by The Post.

F. Fairness

Reporters and editors of The Post are committed to fairness. While arguments about objectivity are endless, the concept of fairness is something that editors and reporters can easily understand and pursue. Fairness results from a few simple practices:

No story is fair if it omits facts of major importance or significance. Fairness includes completeness.

No story is fair if it includes essentially irrelevant information at the expense of significant facts. Fairness includes relevance.

No story is fair if it consciously or unconsciously misleads or even deceives the reader. Fairness includes honesty – leveling with the reader.

No story is fair if reporters hide their biases or emotions behind such subtly pejorative words as “refused,” “despite,” “quietly,” “admit” and “massive.” Fairness requires straightforwardness ahead of flashiness.

G. Opinion

On this newspaper, the separation of news columns from the editorial and opposite-editorial pages is solemn and complete. This separation is intended to serve the reader, who is entitled to the facts in the news columns and to opinions on the editorial and “op-ed” pages. But nothing in this separation of functions is intended to eliminate from the news columns honest, in-depth reporting, or analysis or commentary when plainly labeled.

H. The National and Community Interest

The Washington Post is vitally concerned with the national interest and with the community interest. We believe these interests are best served by the widest possible dissemination of information. The claim of national interest by a federal official does not automatically equate with the national interest. The claim of community interest by a local official does not automatically equate with the community interest.

I. Taste

The Washington Post as a newspaper respects taste and decency, understanding that society’s concepts of taste and decency are constantly changing. A word offensive to the last generation can be part of the next generation’s common vocabulary. But we shall avoid prurience. We shall avoid profanities and obscenities unless their use is so essential to a story of significance that its meaning is lost without them. In no case shall obscenities be used without the approval of the executive editor or the managing editor or his deputy. See Chapter 5, “Using the Language,” for guidance on particular words or terms that may be sensitive.

J. The Post’s Principles

After Eugene Meyer bought The Washington Post in 1933 and began the family ownership that continues today, he published “These Principles”:

The first mission of a newspaper is to tell the truth as nearly as the truth may be ascertained.

The newspaper shall tell ALL the truth so far as it can learn it, concerning the important affairs of America and the world.

As a disseminator of the news, the paper shall observe the decencies that are obligatory upon a private gentleman.

What it prints shall be fit reading for the young as well as for the old.

The newspaper’s duty is to its readers and to the public at large, and not to the private interests of the owner.

In the pursuit of truth, the newspaper shall be prepared to make sacrifices of its material fortunes, if such course be necessary for the public good. The newspaper shall not be the ally of any special interest, but shall be fair and free and wholesome in its outlook on public affairs and public men.

“These Principles” are re-endorsed herewith.