



CROSS-EXAMINATION
FOR INVESTIGATIVE REPORTERS

Heinrich Böhmke

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By Heinrich Böhmke



Journalists can learn a lot from lawyers about the art of strategic questioning. This course is engaging and practical and will equip investigative journalists with a range of clever techniques to get at the truth.

Brigitte Read
Head of Wits China-Africa Programme

The cross-examination course was so empowering to me as a senior journalist. I also learnt a lot more about asking relevant questions during interviews with sources and people I am writing about in my stories. Course facilitator Mr Heinrich Böhmke did his sterling work in presenting the entire cross-examination course and using practical examples to illustrate his lectures to us.

Charles Molele
Senior political reporter at Mail and Guardian

INTRODUCTION

In court cases, one side puts forward an allegation and the other side denies it. At the end, an adjudicator must, applying the standard of proof, decide *which side wins*.

Cross-examination was devised to assist adjudicators to decide which version to believe. It is easy for a witness to come to a tribunal and answer the simple, sympathetic, caucused questions posed by his or her own representative. Cross-examination is meant to *test the version* given in evidence-in-chief. It is performed by the opposing side's representative and is probing, searching, tricky and sometimes hostile. It is meant to expose untruthful, misleading, incomplete, biased, inaccurate or mistaken testimony so that disputes of fact can be justly decided.

There are two objectives cross-examiners seek to achieve. They either want the opposing side's witnesses to agree to things that build their own client's case. Where necessary, a cross-examiner also wants to discredit the version of the opposing witnesses.

In his authoritative study of the law of evidence, Professor Wigmore called cross-examination “the greatest legal engine ever invented for the discovery of truth.”

This is easier said than done. Throughout this course we will discuss and practice various techniques used to build a story and discredit lying interviewees through cross-examination. We will also look at how the evidentiary concept of weight can be used to structure an exposé.

This may seem like an unpleasant sort of thing to learn. Just like litigation uses an adversarial approach to arrive at the truth, so do the true facts of a story sometimes only emerge in adversarial questioning of sources.

Although there are important differences between cross-examination practiced in courts and interview techniques applied by a reporter, much may be learnt from the older enterprise of litigation to improve the still new practice of ‘muck-raking’.

HOW CROSS-EXAMINATION IMPROVES INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

The most common criticism cross-examiners have of reporters is:

- they sometimes fail to close all the escape routes before asking the ‘killer’ question meant to expose a false denial.
- they sometimes over-estimate the intrinsic weight of an allegation owing to its political, social, prurient or general headline-grabbing value.

Understanding how cross-examination works will assist reporters in:

1. Assessing Believability
2. Organising Interview Preparation
3. Developing a Story Theory
4. Applying Effective Questioning Techniques
5. Structuring a Persuasive Argument

1 ASSESSING BELIEVABILITY

The legal term for the believability of evidence is weight.

Litigators are constantly on the look out for seven qualities in the evidence of a witness that will either increase or decrease its weight.

In a case where there was a dispute of fact, the witnesses whose testimony carried the most weight will be found to have spoken the truth.

Cross-examination can assist investigative reporters to assess believability too.

The overwhelming majority of investigative reports have, at their heart, an allegation and a denial. In other words, there are two mutually destructive versions. A truly great exposé consists not only in bringing important facts to the public’s notice. It involves suggesting which side of a set of disputed claims is worthy of belief. It also involves showing the denial of the true version to be mendacious or contrived.

Assessing Believability

An investigative reporter pursues a story because he or she tends to believe a certain allegation; sometimes one the reporter has formulated him or herself. A reporter seldom persists with a story if he or she does not at least have a hypothesis that the underlying allegation is plausible. A reporter will seek to confront the principal with the allegation and usually receive some sort of denial. It then becomes a matter of evaluating, unpacking, debunking, discrediting, exposing or confirming the denial in some way. Sometimes, the denial is more believable than the original accusation and the story is either abandoned or changes in focus. Assessing believability is thus a key skill for reporters.

Many of the qualities of a believable story are common-sense. However, by knowing about, being able to name and constantly evaluating whether an allegation or denial possesses weight, investigative journalists may better get to the bottom of events.

They can also avoid backing the account of a source when there are obvious problems with the veracity of an account.

Finally, if reporters understand what gives weight to a version, they will have a 'structure of belief' within which to persuasively present the facts of their story. Showing that the denial of a principal lacks weight allows the reader to infer falsehood. A reporter is spared the need to editorialize.

Weight of a version

BEHAVIOUR	LEGAL NAME
Evasive, belligerent, unsure Defers answers to another person Body language	Demeanour
Story differs from allies Story conflicts with accepted documentary or hard facts	Contradiction
Changes story during interview Deviates from previous positions	Inconsistency
Another person says the same thing Is backed up by documents	Corroboration
Interviewee has a good memory Interviewee is clear on the facts Interviewee in good position to observe Interviewee has requisite knowledge	Reliability
Has an interest in the case Has reason to lie	Bias
Unlikely story Not common sense Far fetched	Inherent improbability
Expertise	Reputation

Inconsistency and Contradiction

An inconsistency arises when there is a discrepancy between the versions given by the same person. An example of inconsistency is when there is a difference between what an interviewee tells the reporter and what the same person said in a prior statement or correspondence.

A contradiction arises when an allied interviewee contradicts another. It could also arise when a version conflicts with documents produced or undeniable, hard facts. For example, a major-general says that the police used only teargas on protesters the day before, whereas a colonel on the scene stated that live ammunition was used because police feared for their lives. The police account is contradictory. Or the Minister denies being in a relationship with Mr B, but hotel bills show them sharing a room.

One cannot criticize either party for contradicting an account provided by their protagonists. This is almost to be expected.

Minor contradictions between two people speaking about events at the same event or giving contradictory account on a single detail which does not go to the heart of the case is not a basis for disbelieving a source, even if the contradiction could be construed as an anomaly.

Negative Consistency

There is a special kind of inconsistency called negative consistency. A person's credibility suffers if he was silent or omitted to say something earlier on a subject that he is now relying upon as a defense. An interviewer must show that the principal failed to act or relate the same information in the past, when it would have been human nature to do so. This form of discrediting shows that the version is improbable because it does not accord with common sense and seems contrived or made up after the event.

To be effective, discrediting by silence must refer to a material omission of a fact that the witness would naturally have been at pains to reveal. It is unconvincing to criticize a principal in a story unless this requirement is met.

Case Study

On 15 February 2013, the PA of a Director-General is charged by her boss for numerous acts of misconduct that allegedly took place during the past 6 months. They are absenteeism, failure to make hotel bookings and insulting a fellow employee at the Christmas party. The DG sets these out in a suspension letter.

The PA lays a grievance of sexual harassment against the DG on 25 February 2013. Her version is that for the last 6 months, the DG has been sending her text messages proposing a sexual relationship. She ignored these, hoping they would stop.

On 5 January 2013, while she was still on holiday, the DG repeatedly texted her until late at night. She replied by text message, "With due respect Sir, pls do not ask me again. I really respect u nd I wont change". He replied "noted". However, on 21 January, in his office, he told her he wanted to kiss her all over and that he loved her. She finally snapped and rudely told him to "stop messing" with her. This rejection that is the real reason for the action against her, the PA says.

During an investigation on 6 May 2013, the DG repeats the grounds for the disciplinary action against his PA mentioned in his 15 February letter. The harassment story breaks on 10 May 2013. It emerges that the DG is a contender for a ministerial appointment. In a press release he claims that his PA was suspended for repeated absenteeism, attempting to bribe him to give her brother a job and for sending sexual text messages to herself from his mobile phone.

Can you identify the negative consistency?

Corroboration and Bias

Nature of corroboration

Corroboration occurs when another person or document confirms a source's version.

Crucially, *self-corroboration* does not count. Therefore, providing witnesses to attest that one has been consistently saying the same thing for a long time, is not corroboration. A corroborating witness or document must reflect independent knowledge of a fact. An entry in one's own diary, for instance, only shows prior consistency. It does not show whether the entry is consistently truthfully or false.

The value of corroboration is inter-related with the independence or bias of the source of the corroboration. A mother

corroborating that her son was at home at the time of a bank robbery has rather less value than work colleagues who swear the suspect was at work at the material time.

Absence of corroboration

Sometimes, credibility is affected by the absence of corroboration where it could reasonably have been expected. Bear in mind that the burden of a principal to provide corroboration for a denial is in proportion to the weight of the allegation laid before them. A weak allegation may be met with a bald denial.

Reliability of Observation or Knowledge

Identification evidence is notoriously susceptible to error. This does not mean it should not be believed but rather that it should be approached with caution. There should ideally be some other hard evidence that corroborates a source's claim where the denial is one of mistaken identity.

In cases where the identity of a person is in dispute, an interviewee should be closely quizzed about the conditions under which their observation was made. These include the opportunity to observe, lighting, angle of vision, distance, fluidity of the scene, emotional factors influencing accuracy, passage of time and prior knowledge of the person identified.

Reliability of knowledge relates to whether a source is actually in a position to know what he or she claims to know. For example, did the source personally witness the recruitment of child soldiers or is the source reporting what villagers told him they observed. On what is the villager's claim based? Is there any way of verifying it with them? If not, why not?

Or does a source 'close to the police investigation' actually know that the CEO of XYZ Industries is a suspect in an illegal mining investigation? On what is this allegation based? What documents did the source see, how connected to the investigating team is he or she really? Why would the team share this information with him or her? If information was not shared, how did the interviewee gain personal knowledge?

Similarly, does the source who says that the company registered in Guernsey is owned by a former President actually know this as a fact? On what is this knowledge based? How did the source pierce the veil of secrecy? If it is an inference from surrounding circumstances, is it the most reasonable inference?

Sometimes there is an ideological expectation that a story will follow established (and sometimes problematically prejudiced) narrative lines. For instance, if a European businessman claims he was asked for a bribe in Nigeria, certain generalisations provide half the 'proof' of this particular allegation. Similarly, if a member of a shack-dwellers organization in conflict with the ruling party is shot, instinctive political sympathies for the downtrodden and antipathy towards the state, supply half the 'proof' that this specific killing was a government hit. Yet, these narrative expectations are not reliable proof or knowledge of the particular events in question. Spin doctors, in particular, propose an expedient narrative first. They then insert selected facts into this scenario to make a case beneficial to their 'client'.

Inherent Improbability

The inherent probability of a story refers to whether it rings true or not. Put otherwise, is it far-fetched or does it conform with the way things do tend to work? Be aware that an improbable story may end up being true. It just needs greater levels of verification.

2 ORGANISING INTERVIEW PREPARATION

There is a misconception that good cross-examination flows from spontaneous bouts of eloquence and an intuitive sense of what questions to ask. In truth, good cross-examination depends on thorough, almost obsessive, preparation.

The same is true in preparing for an investigative interview, especially with a principal. Brilliance cannot compensate for lack of preparation.

One uses the seven aspects of believability, discussed above, to prepare the questions one poses.

There are two kinds of interviews, the *adversarial* and *exploratory*.

Adversarial/Accusatory Interview

Purpose To obtain concession, confession or disprovable denial.
Style Forensic and/or confrontational

Preparation

- Official documents, such as legal papers, policies, deeds, government reports, PAIA disclosures, conflict of interest records, corporate financial statements and ownership structure.
- Prior articles citing the interviewee
- Personal and public writings
- Google search
- Databases of public records
- Research reports

Organising Interview Preparation

Interviews with on-the-record sources as well as, in some instances, interviews with anonymous sources or whistleblowers, providing background information or specific accusations

Then you can make something of:

- A principal's angry, evasive answers
- Hard facts that say otherwise, allies who contradict
- Prior inconsistent statements
- Motive to lie (financial gain, political affiliation)
- An interviewee's lack of first hand knowledge, inability to know what they claim to know
- A failure to provide corroboration when it could be expected Illogical, unnatural or far-fetched explanations. These do not have the 'ring of truth', defy common sense, how systems usually work or how a person in the same situation would likely have behaved
- What better-qualified experts say

Exploratory Interview

Purpose Fact Seeking, Building Rapport, Obtaining a Version
Style Professional, empathetic, interested, non-judgmental

- Run through same checks as above, but make sure you get the same story told to you twice.
- Explore Motivation / bias
- Check for counter-factuals
- Check demeanour

Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity
Seneca (4 BC – 65 AD)

3 DEVELOPING A STORY THEORY



A case theory, adapted for investigative reporters, is a story theory.
A story theory is made up of two elements: an *allegation* and *factual theory*.

A reporter must first have a conceptual handle on the allegations made in the article. This comprises understanding *how much proof the public expects* before they will give credence to the allegations. This is not a legal standard of proof but something more subjective and changeable. It is a judgment call and depends on various factors. For example, the proposition that Archbishop Tutu was driving under the influence will require more proof than that Tony Yengeni was.

The second leg of an allegation theory is what the elements of the wrong-doing actually are. In criminal law, offences are neatly defined. In the world of public morality, it is not always so clear. What constitutes 'hypocrisy' or 'conflict of interest'? What constitutes a 'draconian' law? What is a free but not fair election? Many stories set out to expose a specific kind of wrong-doing and draw in readers with this proposition, only to have the facts fall short of establishing this claim.

Developing a Story Theory

The factual theory deals with the actual information at a reporter's disposal.

First, is there sufficient information to establish the allegation? For example, does the evidence show a link between the diamond mine and the General or just between the diamond mine and the General's brother-in-law? In the first case, the necessary facts exist to found an important scoop. In the second instance, the import is less clear.

Thus, to make a newsworthy allegation out of the brother-in-law connection requires more work. Are the General and his brother-in-law involved in other commercial ventures? Does the brother-in-law fund the General in other ways?

Do units under the General's command guard the mine? If the story is to be about the General, sufficient facts need to exist to link him to the diamond mine.

The next question is whether the allegations are particularly believable or not, especially when weighed against the denials. This is persuasiveness. For example, assume your source claims that the General visits the mine every day and leaves with bags of dollars. There is now factual sufficiency.

However, what if the sole source is the former husband of the General's current girlfriend (bias)? How does the source know that there is money in the bags (reliability of observation)? How plausible is it that the General receives his share of the profits in this way (inherent probability)? We apply the qualities of believability, discussed above, to assess the persuasiveness of our story.

STORY THEORY

Allegation Theory

How much proof will readers require?

What are the legal/logical elements of the allegation?

+

Factual Theory

Sufficient Facts (whether you have evidence of the allegation)

Persuasive Facts (how believable are the source's allegations)

4 APPLYING QUESTIONING TECHNIQUES

Ask mainly leading questions

If you don't ask the right questions, you don't get the rights answers.

Edward Hodnett

A wise man's question contains half the answer.

Solomon Ibn Gabirol

If you are not asking a fair amount of leading questions, this means that you are not working off a story theory. You are not strategically pushing the principal to the concession you want him to make, at the risk of being discredited. An added problem is that you are giving the principal an opportunity, (which most of them take) to expand upon their answers and confuse issues. You lose control if you do not ask leading questions.

It will, naturally, be necessary to ask non-leading, exploratory questions from time to time. However, if you have properly prepared, you will know the answers to most of the important questions and can simply seek confirmation.

In broadcast interviews, it is actually the interviewer who provides information. Ideally, the interview of a principal consists of an interviewer making substantive statements and the principal either agreeing with them or being made to look unreliable, biased and so on by follow-up facts, presented as questions.

The interviewer decides the content, wording, pace, duration, and factual sequence in which the allegation is set out.

A well-constructed interview does not allow witnesses wide latitude to respond.

Remember the purpose of an adversarial interview, particularly for broadcast, is to put your story theory before the public. The interviewee is only a medium to deliver the message. People ask questions because they do not know the answer. That is not the situation as an adversarial interviewer. You ask questions to get agreement.

Questions seeking information are inappropriate and even dangerous in cross-examination. They can make the interviewee seem the fount of information, giving up an interviewer's power and control. A principal who understands that the interviewer knows the answer will be less likely to try to evade. The public, who know what the right answer should be before a principal speaks, will be disappointed when the principal fails to provide it.

How can the examiner accomplish all this? With *statements*, not questions. Just state the facts and anticipate that the principal will agree.

Example

- Q. On the 14th of October 2011, you awarded a contract to a Mr. Johnny Jacobs
- Q. Mercia Jacobs is your sister, not so.
- Q. And she's married to Johnny Jacobs. Since 2006.

Say it with a full-stop. Do not say it with a question mark. If the interviewee denies, either confront him with the source of your information or follow up later.

Close Escape Routes

Many a carefully planned discrediting has failed because the witness found a plausible escape route, which you are obliged to report. Anticipate this possibility by asking yourself, "If I were this person, where would I try to escape?" Then try to prevent this by closing off all the possible exits to your impeachment. It is a very important technique to learn.

Know when to Quit

The fruits of cross-examination are only tasted in closing argument. It is here where you will explain to an adjudicator what the answers you received from a witness means. The same applies to adversarial interviews. To some extent, the reader or viewer stands in the position of the adjudicator for an investigative journalist. Simply reporting the implausible, biased or contradictory version given to you will do the damage. For a print exposé, don't argue with the interviewer. Save your ultimate point about why the denial is implausible for your story, not the interview.

Just because broadcast interviews are accusatory does not mean they should become an argument either. If one's questions are precise and strategic, there is seldom any cause to argue with an interviewee. You are confronting the principal with the problems in his story to get a reaction. You don't have to win an argument with a principal but with your viewers.

Once one understands this, there is really no reason to argue with a witness. If they refuse to answer a question properly, or blatantly contradict what they said earlier or their story just does not ring true – you are not going to get the witness to admit this.

However, one will set these unbelievable answers out before your public and allow them to draw adverse conclusions.

Applying Questioning Techniques

For television interviews beware trying to improve upon an answers favourable to your story theory. The principal could easily start qualifying or hedging and then your good work in getting a concession is undone.

Bear in mind that confronting a principal with a contradiction or the illogicality of what they say, is not arguing. Pinning a witness down to a specific question is also not arguing. After having done this, allow the reader or viewer to decide.

Advocacy Insights

Below follow some insights from the world of litigation that may benefit investigative journalists.

Conservatism of Tone

It is best to avoid perjorative adjectives typical of 'yellow' journalism.

While Min. Klaar may well be a contemptible person, it weakens your story if you pass this judgment yourself. As far as you can, set out the facts using proper and accurate descriptions. Do the same in your analysis of the denial. Allow the reader to be outraged.

For example, don't say: Min Klaar's reasons for slimily leaving Mozambique on 3 September, very conveniently, two days before the end of the tourism summit, have changed more times than an infant's dirty diaper. The writer seems far too involved in the story, too tendentious, to be persuasive.

The national idiom

Different places have varying standards of public discourse. The way, for example, one argues that electoral fraud occurred in Zimbabwe for a Zimbabwean readership differs from the way one makes the same case for a French audience. A certain short-hand can be used with a local audience who are familiar with certain facts. For example, if you suggested to a French audience that it was unlikely an army officer involved in the Gukurahundi massacres would be elected by a Bulawayo constituency, they would be bemused. You would need to tell them why.

You will also find that language use, metaphor, and tone of news reports differ from country to country, even among journalists making the same claim. Reading a report about the conduct of elections in Harare in The Zimbabwean, the Mail and Guardian and The Telegraph differs widely in tone even though they make the same essential claim that recent elections were not credible.

Fairness

Privacy protects us from being misdefined and judged out of context in a world of short attention spans, a world in which information can readily be confused with knowledge
Jeffrey Rosen

Privacy, the critic says, is not just a synonym for loneliness. It is the kind of idea that tries to give hypocrisy and good name.
Avishai Margalit

Be sure that, in the drive to prove an allegation, one is fair to the principal. This means not publishing stories until there is sufficient proof of the allegation. Publishing vague and weak allegations hoping to 'shake the tree' is a dangerous game. Also, do not require corroboration for a denial when the allegation itself is inherently weak. No one

likes to finally be exonerated on charges of child murder, after one's colleagues and family have first been contacted to check on your whereabouts the day a child was killed.

It is also unfair to misconstrue the evidence or versions of a source or principal. This may make for a salacious story but gradually the craft of investigative journalism suffers and no-one takes your publication seriously any more.

If you appear to be unfair in your criticism of a principal you will alienate the audience and, in fact, build his or her credibility. See the SPJ, Code of Ethics at the back of this file.

Reputation

Over time, your own name grows. People begin speaking about a Estacio Valois, George Monbiot, Mzilikaza wa Afrika, Eric Mwambe or Rian Malan article. Should you peddle stories that turn out to be substantially false, future work is received with greater skepticism.

An example of this, which was unfortunate all around, was the De Wet Potgieter 'exposure' of Al-Qaeda training camps in the Karroo in April 2013.

Also remember, if you get a reputation for not treating principals fairly, you will find it very difficult to get interviews even from honest sources who have nothing to hide.

Think like the Public

Related to keeping a conservative tone, is remembering that the reader or viewer is the final arbiter of the weight of the allegation and the denial. While you may be convinced that a source's car-crash was related to his exposing corruption in a multinational company, the general public is far more likely to put this down to an unhappy co-incidence. This is unless you have evidence that another car pushed him off the road or the autopsy shows he died of strangulation.

Do not advance far-fetched or logically stretched arguments. While the public will appreciate a thriller with such a plot, in real life they tend to discount vague conspiracy theories.

The Dangers of Manicheism

Some journalists are described as 'crusading'. They write a number of articles pursuing the same allegations, illegal logging, a police death squad, or defects in car design leading to accidents. In the process, they build up a considerable personal and political investment in allegations they make. One side in the story becomes entirely good and the other side entirely bad.

While there is often a black and white dimension to a story, life is often more complex and nuanced. The same shack dweller organisation, oppressed by the municipality, might also be quite capable of murdering political opponents. The white farmer who fired striking workers may actually pay far more than all other farmers in the district. A good investigative journalist can write a story exposing wrong-doing without painting the wrong-doer as a complete villain or the victim as a complete saint.

More sorrow than anger

I approach these questions unwillingly, as they are sore subjects, but no cure can be effected without touching upon and handling them
Titus Livius (59 BC – 17 AD)

As we saw earlier with conservatism of tone, if the reader gets the sense that the journalist has a personal investment in the story, it loses credence. Writing in an angry, judgmental tone betrays an emotional investment. If you are inclined to comment on the conduct of a farmer who evicted pregnant workers from their homes, it is better to say how sad it is that in this day and age, such heartlessness still occurs. Wondering how it is that the farmer has not yet been strung up from the nearest tree, filthy racist that he is, is less appropriate.

Remember: Facts, recorded in powerful detail, speak louder than sermons

Time conditions everything

How much time do you have? Is it a one-on-one meeting over a meal? Is it a ten minute slot on the telephone? A doorstep? A press conference?

Rehearse

It never hurts.

Scenario Plan

Prepare for the denial. How will you follow it up? How will a denial help you write your dream scoop? Should you ask some questions before the killer question that will make a denial seem implausible or contradictory? Prepare for anger, impatience, outrage, begging.

Establish Rapport

Do not leave your social graces at home. Put people at ease. It won't fool everyone but it does show your professionalism and reduces the chance that the interviewee will take chances with you.

The Hard Question

State media journalists, in particular, have a tendency to stop just short of asking the necessary but hard and embarrassing question of senior government officials. A real journalist cannot be shy or overly respectful if they wish to get to the bottom of a story. The hard question needs to be asked. And, if a reporter has set things up properly in questions before, the ensuing confrontation with the hard facts is all that is needed to complete the job, as uncomfortable as this may make you feel

Heinrich Böhmke



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The following sources were consulted in the preparation of this material

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SPJ CODE OF ETHICS

Journalists should:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
- Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.
- Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.
- Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.
- Avoid misleading re-enactments or staged news events. If re-enactment is necessary to tell a story, label it.
- Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story
- Never plagiarize.
- Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.
- Examine their 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 views they find 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.
- Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.
- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.
- Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.
- Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.
- Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.
- Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.
- Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.

<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>



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