

Instructions and guidelines

SERBIAN  
JOURNALISTS'  
CODE OF ETHICS

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## - Instructions and guidelines -

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The responsibility for opinions expressed in this document lies with journalists' associations and it may not necessarily coincide with official positions of UNESCO and the European Union.

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## PREAMBLE

**Journalists' Association of Serbia and Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia adopt this Code as an ethical standard for professional conduct of journalists.**

**It is journalists' duty to follow ethical and professional principles contained in the Code, and to resist pressures to violate these principles.**

**The Code recommends solidarity with colleagues when the journalists' professional conduct and standards are endangered.**

Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics was adopted in 2006 by the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia and the Journalists' Association of Serbia. The journalist associations amended the Code in 2013 adding provisions regarding the prevention of corruption and conflict of interest. The journalist associations owe special thanks to the publishers of the previous three editions of the Code, Konrad Adenauer Foundation Belgrade and the Council of Europe, for their contribution to strengthening media self-regulation and improving ethical standards of free and independent journalism.

### Explanation:

Professional and ethical standards defined in the Code aspire to improve the reputation of the journalistic profession, promote commitment to freedom of thought, speech and expression, as well as the independence of the media.

Journalists who violate the principles of this Code cannot count on unconditional support of journalists' associations and their colleagues.

The media are obliged to place above all other interests, the interest of the public, providing comprehensive, timely and truthful informing. In the context of this Code, the public interest includes publishing all important information which is helpful to the reader / listener / viewer in forming their judgment / opinion regarding various phenomena and events.

**Editors and publishers are responsible for the application of this Code.**

### Explanation:

Journalists, that is editors, are professionally accountable to the public (readers / viewers / listeners), and not the publisher / owner (the state and interest groups), and their private, economic, political and other interests.

A publisher / an owner has an indisputable right to earn a profit and use it as a guideline in media management. At the same time, the purpose of the media is the public interest, and ownership rights must not violate it. Business, political and private interests of a publisher / an owner must not be an excuse or justification for violation of this Code.

A publisher / an owner should not alter the editorial policy of the media at his own discretion, without the consent of the editorial board.

A publisher has the right to define editorial policy, but it must not be in conflict with the law or with the professional code.

## I AUTHENTICITY OF REPORTING

- 1. A journalist is obliged to report on the events of public interest accurately, objectively, comprehensively and in a timely fashion, while respecting the public's right to know the truth and respecting the basic standards of the journalistic profession.**

Guidelines:

- Possible effect of the published information on the media or the media owner should not affect the decision of its publication.
- Political or ideological background of the information, should not affect the decision of its publication, even in the case when the political or ideological background is contrary to political convictions of journalists, editors or the media owners.
- Political parties Press Releases or that of other interest groups must be marked as such. In case that the Press Release is processed by the editorial board, readers / viewers / listeners must be informed about the primary source of information.
- Editorial processing of the Press Release must not alter the facts, the context in which they are used, or their meaning.

- 2. It is the right of the media to have different editorial concepts, but it is the obligation of journalists and editors to make a clear distinction between the facts they transmit and comments, assumptions and speculations.**

Guidelines:

- The media which transmit agency news bear responsibility for the information published. If the agency is named as a source of information, shortening or a adding of information must not change the elementary meaning, or the conclusion that the agency placed.
- When publishing the results of public opinion polls, it is recommended to indicate: the name of the agency that conduct-

ed the poll, purchaser of the research, the number of people interviewed, the time when the study was conducted, questions asked.

- If a published comment is in contradiction to the editorial policy or the attitude of editorial staff, it is recommended that readers / viewers / listeners are informed.
- Openly advocating for a political party is incompatible with the journalistic profession.
- Journalists are not obliged to offer text authorisation to an interviewee. If, in agreement with the editors, authorisation is granted, the interviewee has no right to change the journalists' questions, the meaning and context of the answers.
- Changes to the content of photography are impermissible without the consent of the author.
- The difference between documentary photography and photomontage must be clearly emphasized. The readers / viewers must not be misled.
- A drastic intervention in the digital processing of documentary photography is impermissible. Only minimal adjustments (in the domain of colour, contrast, sharpness, etc.) that do not affect its contents are permitted.

**3. A journalist is obliged to indicate the source of information. If the source does not want to be revealed, journalists and editors have to act with due professional care and take a stand as a professional authority in support of the information and be responsible for its accuracy.**

Guidelines:

- In case that the source of information insists on remaining unnamed, the editorial staff is obliged to respect that choice. A deviation from this rule is permissible only if the information relates to planning of a crime or a violation of the constitutional order and security of the state, when the obligation of the

editorial staff is to report to the authorities. It is recommended that in these cases a legal advisor is consulted.

- Publishing information marked as confidential is permitted only if it is established that the public's right to be informed is a priority to the causes of confidentiality.

**4. When necessary a journalist is obliged to consult as many sources as possible, and enable them to present their views.**

Guidelines:

- A journalist is obliged to consult at least two independent sources of information that will confirm or deny the given information.
- Two mutually independent sources of information are particularly desirable if there are indications that the official source provided incomplete and / or inaccurate information. The existence of two independent sources of information is equally recommended in cases when the key information originated from an anonymous or a confidential source.

**5. Publishing speculative charges, libels, rumours and fabricated letters or letters whose author is unknown or his identity is not verifiable, is incompatible with journalism.**

Guidelines:

- The content of the published letters must be in accordance with the principles of professional ethics.
- Although the sender's address should not be published, it must be known to the editorial staff. If there is doubt regarding the identity of the sender, the letter should not be published.
- Publishing fabricated letters is not permitted, nor is the interferences with the letters without the author's permission.
- In case that a journalist estimates that the publication of unverified information or a speculation is in the public interest, he is obliged to emphasise clearly and unambiguously that the information is not confirmed.

## II INDEPENDENCE FROM PRESSURE

- 1. A journalist should resist any pressure to freely exercise the profession, as well as any form of censorship. A journalist receives responsibilities only from the editors. A journalist must not postpone publishing relevant information, except for the necessary checks of accuracy.**

Guidelines:

- NA journalist / an editor should inform the public about the pressures that threaten the freedom of information and independence of the media.
- An editor is obliged to protect a journalist from all forms of censorship and pressure that are known, regardless of whether they originate from a publisher / an owner, the state, interest groups or anyone else.
- Self-censorship is considered to be a violation of professional and ethical standards.
- Editors' involvement must not alter the facts, context and attitudes of a journalist who signs the text / report. In case that the editor alters the facts, context and views expressed in the text / report, the journalist is obliged to clearly dissociate from these interferences.
- Title of the text / report must not be in contradiction with the essence of the text / report.
- Title of the text / report is subject to the same ethical principles as the text / report.
- Any involvement (of an editor, a graphic editor, a designer, and others), in terms of image content, is impermissible without the consent of the author.

- 2. Economic and political interests of a publisher must not affect the editorial policy in a manner that would result in inaccurate, biased, incomplete and untimely informing of the public.**

Guidelines:

- If a report deals with individuals and companies that have an ownership stake in the media, it is recommended that a journalist / an editor indicates that fact.
- If a publisher of a media has an ownership stake in the organisation, the company which is the subject of the report, a reporter / an editor should indicate this fact.

- 3. A journalist cannot be forced to express opinions contrary to his conscience.**

Guidelines:

- A journalist cannot be punished for refusing to report contrary to his preferences and moral principles.
- If a journalist is forced to report contrary to his beliefs, he has the right to inform the public.

### III PREVENTION OF CORRUPTION AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

**1. A journalist must not receive or request financial or any other benefit for collecting, publishing, postponing or preventing the gathering or publishing of information.**

Guidelines:

- If a journalist meets the other party in a restaurant, the cost should be borne by the editorial staff. In case that this is impossible, the journalist should insist on meeting in a place that does not require unwarranted expenditure.
- A journalist / an editor must not sell documents, audio / video, books and other materials received for the purpose of media coverage. These materials should not be shared with other media without the consent of the source of information.
- It is recommended that materials obtained from the source of information remain in possession of the editorial staff or the media's documentation centre the journalist / editor reports for.

**2. A journalist is obliged to refuse a gift if it can be reasonably assumed that the gift is connected with the exercise of their profession and that it could affect the objectivity of their work. A journalist is obliged to report to the editorial staff if they are offered or have received gifts in connection with performing their journalistic duty.**

Guidelines:

- Acceptance of gifts is permitted only in cases of promotional material (pens, notebooks, hats, etc.), or objects of insignificant material value.

**3. If an individual or an organization pays for the journalist / an editor / editorial staff their travel expenses, they are obliged to indicate this fact in the text / report.**

Guidelines:

- If the report covers topics which are a part of a study tour, professional training or scholarship, which are organised and paid for by the state authorities, international and local non-governmental organizations and foundations, political parties, companies and other, then it must be unequivocally stated in the text /report.
- Editorial staff is responsible for covering business expenses for its journalists, their salary, travel expenses of journalists on assignment, tickets for various events, etc.

**4. A journalist does not report on issues in which they have private (personal or group) interest.**

Guidelines:

- It will not be considered inappropriate if a journalist, who in a certain matter has a personal interest, reports on the subject, if it is a matter of wider public interest (for example a journalist who lives in one part of the city and writes about the necessity of building a new school in that part of the city)

**5. A journalist should do everything possible to avoid situations that could lead to a conflict of interest, real or apparent, and that could lead them to compromise their reputation or the reputation of the profession. A journalist who cannot avoid a conflict of interest is obliged to notify the editor without delay.**

Guidelines:

- A journalist should not report or express their views on individuals with whom he has blood relations, is married to, and is in close family or friendly relations.
- A journalist / an editor should not report on topics in which there is a personal, political or commercial interest, for example as a member of a managing, supervisory body or a board of directors of the company / organization / club, and other.



- A journalist should not be engaged in a sector in which a member of his (near and far) family or a close friend has decision making power.

**6. Work in PR and marketing agencies, lobbying agencies, public bodies and institutions, and political parties, is incompatible with the profession.**

Guidelines:

- Participation in a political, electoral or a media campaign (political parties / companies, and other) cannot be performed simultaneously with journalistic / editorial work. The political activity of the family members of journalists / editors could also cause real or apparent conflict of interest.
- Work in counterintelligence, intelligence and other security services or work for these services is incompatible with the profession.

**7. A journalist must not be in any kind of a business relationship with the subjects whose activities they cover.**

Guidelines:

- A journalist must not write about companies on whose business success his interest depends or the interest of his (near and far) family or friends. If such an interest exists, the journalist is obliged to notify the editor, upon receipt of the task.
- A journalist should not report on the stocks that they own or with which they intends to trade.

## IV JOURNALISTS' RESPONSIBILITIES

**1. A journalist is primarily responsible to their readers, listeners and viewers. This responsibility must not be subordinate to the interests of others, particularly the interest of publishers, government and other state institutions. A journalist must oppose all those who violate human rights or promote any kind of discrimination, hate speech and incitement to violence.**

Guidelines:

- A journalist should inform the editor if their personal, economic, political and other interests are intertwined with professional duties.
- Journalism as a profession is incompatible with the spread of any kind of sexual, gender, ethnic, racial, social, or religious stereotypes. Prejudices that journalists have privately must not be broadcast/published in any context, neither openly nor covertly.
- It is unacceptable to name specific groups colloquially, in a derogatory manner and imprecisely.
- In reporting crimes, national, racial, religious, ideological and political affiliation, as well as sexual orientation, social and marital status of suspects or victims, are mentioned only in case when the orientation, citizenship or status are directly related to the type and nature of a committed criminal offense.

**2. Forgery of documents and plagiarism are unacceptable and are considered a serious violation of standards and professional conduct of journalists.**

Guidelines:

- Using other people's information, ideas, research, photographs and graphics without adequate quoting of sources, is considered plagiarism, and is one of the most serious vio-

lations of professional and ethical standards. Plagiarism endangers the credibility of journalists / a media company, and leads to the readers / viewers / listeners loss of trust of in the journalistic profession.

**3. A journalist is obliged to respect the presumption of innocence and must not proclaim anyone guilty before the Court's verdict.**

Guidelines:

- The media are obliged to respect the right to the presumption of innocence and to protect the privacy and identity of the suspect or the perpetrator, even in the case of admission of guilt.
- Protecting privacy and identity includes not only protection of names (labelling a suspect by using initials), but also protecting other data that could direct to the identity: photos, address, description of appearance, marital status, social status, belonging to a group, the names of neighbours, relatives and friends.
- Victims and suspects are often not aware of the power of the media. A journalist is obliged to take that into consideration, and not to abuse the ignorance of their collocutors.
- If a victim of a crime consents to be interviewed, a journalist must not reveal the identity of the victim or a possible perpetrator, on the basis of that conversation.
- Reporting on criminal offenses, during the conversation with potential witnesses, a journalist must be careful not to disclose the identity of a victim or the identity and the right to the presumption of innocence of a suspect.
- A journalist must take into consideration a possibility of being exposed to abuse and manipulation by alleged victims of certain offenses.

**4. A journalist is forbidden from using inappropriate, disturbing, pornographic and other content that may have harmful effects on children.**

**5. A journalist is obliged to respect and protect the rights and dignity of children, victims of crimes, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.**

**6. A journalist nurtures the culture and ethics of the public word, respects the right to reply, apology and correction, and is obliged to publish a corresponding correction promptly.**

Guidelines:

- The media are obliged to publish, without delay, accurate and complete information, even if they have placed the information inadvertently, which subsequently turned out to be unfounded accusation, rumour, insult or a slander.

**7. A journalist / an editor must not agree to place in any media format any form of commercial advertising or political propaganda. The journalist will not undersign commercial advertising or political propaganda**

Guidelines:

- A journalist / an editor is obliged to refuse the placement of commercial advertising or political propaganda in the form of journalistic expression.
- A journalist must be particularly careful when using press releases, articles and other material from PR and marketing agencies, since they primarily aim to provide for their clients (directly or indirectly) free and favourable publicity.

## V JOURNALISTS' ATTENTIONA

- 1. A journalist is obliged to approach their work with due professional care.**
- 2. A journalist must not blindly trust sources of information. A journalist must keep in mind that information sources often have their own interests or interests of the social groups to whom they belong, and that they adjust their statements to such interests.**

Guidelines:

- In contact with sources of information a special care is required to avoid real or apparent inclination, arising out of close personal relationships.
- Readers / viewers / listeners must be notified regarding direct benefits that the source can achieve from publishing said information. If the source has a direct interest, or is trying to deal with someone, readers / viewers / listeners must be informed.

- 3. Keeping secret the facts that might significantly affect the public perception of an event is equal to their deliberate distortion or lying.**

Guidelines:

- If the sources of information are spokespersons of political parties, individuals and companies, this information must be indicated because of the possibility of their direct or indirect impact on objectivity of reporting.

- 4. A journalist must be aware of the danger of discrimination being spread by media and will do everything to avoid discrimination based, among other things, on race, gender, age, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social belonging.**

Guidelines:

- Belonging to a particular ethnic, political, ideological, or other group, as well as their marital status, religious beliefs, social belonging, is indicated only in such cases when the information is necessary for complete understanding of the context of events being reported on.
- Journalists should avoid phrases that are chauvinist, sexist, or other discriminatory connotations (for example: the fairer sex, member of the stronger sex” and the alike).

## VI RELATION TO THE SOURCES OF INFORMATION

**1. A journalist has the right to investigate all circumstances and facts regarding the events that are of public interest.**

**2. While collecting information a journalist must not use extortion, threats and persecution against the source of information.**

Guidelines:

- Besides the fact that they must not threaten the sources of information, journalists should not promise a favourable coverage in exchange for information.

**3. A journalist is obliged to respect a request for anonymity from the source of information. Inventing anonymous sources is a serious offense to the standards of journalists' professional conduct.**

Guidelines:

- Using anonymous (confidential) sources of information is generally not recommended, unless there is no other way to acquire the information which is deemed to be of utmost importance to the public.
- Often, the use of unnamed sources of information is only the way for the source or a journalist / media to present inaccurate, incomplete or insufficiently verified information. In case it transpires that hiding the source is used to cover their absence, the credibility of journalists / media will be seriously undermined.
- Anonymity / confidentiality should be provided for the sources that can provide "first hand", information, that is, documents that directly confirm or, by itself, represent information of great public importance.
- An editor is required to check with the journalist the justification for the use of anonymous (confidential) sources of infor-

mation. Regarding this, it is necessary that at least one editor knows and protects the identity of an anonymous source.

- If the source of information requests from the journalist that their identity remain confidential even to the editor, this request should be rejected.

**4. A journalist is obliged to present themselves to a source of information and name a media they work for at that moment, except if doing differently is in the public interest and when it is done in accordance with the rules set out in this Code.**

Guidelines:

- False impersonation and false identification of the media a journalist works for is not permitted. Journalists on assignment must not present themselves as persons who have special powers, business people or "ordinary citizens".
- Concealing the identity of a journalist can be used only as the final means to obtain information: if other methods have been unsuccessfully applied, if the information cannot be obtained in any other way, and only when it relates to information of great importance to the public.
- In case of concealing the journalists' identity, it is necessary that the editorial board is informed, and it is recommended to consult legal advisors for possible legal consequences.

**5. At the request of an editor a journalist may tell them the identity of a source who wishes to remain anonymous, and the editor is obliged to protect the anonymity of the source.**

Guidelines:

- If a source of information is unnamed, the editor must be informed of the identity of the source, since both, journalists and editors are responsible for the accuracy of the information published.
- A journalist has the right not to disclose the identity of an anonymous (confidential) source to the editor. In this case,

the editor may decide not to publish the information obtained from a source unknown to them, and this procedure shall not be considered censorship and is in accordance with the Code.

6. **Juveniles, as a rule, may be interviewed only in the presence of, or with the consent of their parents or legal guardians.**
7. **A journalist must never abuse the emotions of other people, their ignorance or lack of judgement.**

Guidelines:

- Sources of information with which journalists converse are not always aware of the power of the media and the consequences that their statements may have on them personally, as well as on people they are talking about. Conscious abuse is incompatible with journalism, as well as inattention whose possible consequence could be abuse of the collocutor.

8. **A journalist must not unjustly create fear among people or instil false hopes.**

Guidelines:

- A journalist who deliberately encourages unfounded fears and hopes of readers / viewers / listeners, especially because of the “attractiveness” of the text / report, violates the Code in the most extreme manner.

## VII RESPECT FOR PRIVACY

1. **A journalist respects the privacy, dignity and integrity of the people they write about. The right to privacy is narrowed when public figures are in question, especially public officials.**

Guidelines:

- When reporting on accidents and crimes, publishing the names and photographs of victims and perpetrators that clearly identify them is not permitted. Also, publishing any information which could indirectly reveal the identity of either victim, or the perpetrator, before the relevant authority officially announces is not allowed.
- A journalist must have an awareness of the power of media, or the possible consequences for the victim or the perpetrator, if their identity is disclosed. They must take into account, in particular, the weight of the possible consequences in case of any errors / incorrect assumptions in reporting.
- Even if the relevant state authorities publish information which are in the domain of privacy of the perpetrator or the victim, the media must not transmit that information. The error of the state authorities does not imply “permission” for the violation of ethical principles of the profession.
- Public figures are aware in advance that their right to privacy is somewhat limited, but this does not mean that the media can violate it without any reason or explanation.
- Data from the private lives of public figures are published only if it is in the public interest, or if they have a direct impact on a number of people, if they are in contradiction with the spirit of the function which that person performs, or ideas that the person publicly advocates.
- In case of death of a public figure, the media must be particularly careful with the information which subsequently associ-

ates that person with an offense or discriminatory information. Even when it comes to information of public importance, a journalist must be aware that the deceased persons are legally released from further prosecution.

- 2. Journalists and editors should especially avoid speculations and transmitting insufficiently verifiable attitudes in reporting on accidents and tragedies which have resulted in deaths or when the financial and other interests of the citizens are severely affected.**
- 3. When reporting on events involving personal pain and shock, a journalist is obliged to adapt their questions so that they reflect the spirit of compassion and discretion.**

Guidelines:

- Photographers and cameramen are obliged to act with respect and compassion when taking pictures of victims of accidents and crimes.
- 4. A journalist is obliged to ensure that a child is not endangered or placed at risk due to the publication of their name, photograph or recording with their image, house, the community in which they live or recognisable surroundings.**

Guidelines:

- Representatives of the state and public institutions working in child protection are sometimes unaware of the way media function and their wider impact. The information that they provide to journalists often involves disclosure of the identity of juveniles. A journalist must not abuse their good intentions or ignorance. Information received from doctors, social workers, teachers, and so on, which directly or indirectly refers to the identity of juveniles, must not be published.

## VIII UTILISING HONOURABLE MEANS

- 1. While collecting information, photos, documents, audio and video a journalist will only utilise honourable means.**

Guidelines:

- Journalists and editors must not publish material acquired by using hidden cameras, listening devices, or unauthorised wiretapping, except when the public interest is protected (for example: disclosure of information regarding the threat to life and health of the population, corruption, abuse of power, etc.).
  - For the application of this exception there must be a clearly defined and transparent editorial procedure.
  - Gathering information by bribing sources is incompatible with journalism.
- 2. A journalist should not continue asking questions, phoning, photographing or recording a private person after they were asked to stop.**
  - 3. Pressure on a private person to answer any questions can be continued after the rejection, but only on condition that there is a grounded public interest at stake.**
  - 4. A journalist has the right, in relation to the state and other institutions, to continually ask questions that they believe are of public interest, regardless of whether they are asked to stop or not.**

## IX RESPECTING AUTHORSHIP

### 1. Media and journalists respect and application of current legislation on copyright. When permission for reproduction from another source is received, this is done with respect for the author and with naming the source.

Guidelines:

- If a work of authorship or a study is paraphrased, it is necessary to specify the author or the source.
- Photos must be signed using the name of the author or the owner of the photos.
- Violation of copyright by an unauthorised reprinting, copying photographs from print media, “downloading” photos from the Internet, is considered a severe violation of the Code.
- Photos cannot be leased to other individuals, organisations, institutions and media without the author's permission.

### 2. A journalist will not undersign as theirs text, drawing, illustration, photograph, video and audio clips of other authors.

Guidelines:

- If more journalists / co-workers are engaged on the text / report, it is necessary to name all the persons who participated, regardless of the extent of their contribution, their status and hierarchical position in the media outlet (a part-time associate, freelance, journalist or editor).
- Photomontage and processed photographs must be clearly marked and differentiated from documentary photography. The readers / viewers must not be deliberately misled.

### 3. A journalist should refuse to sign the text, photograph, drawing, illustration, audio, or video:

- **when it is changed by the editorial, proofreading or other interference, so that its meaning is changed, and if such changes are contrary to the opinion and belief of the journalist,**

- **in case when a journalist has a reasonable interest (personal security, etc.).**

Guidelines:

- A journalist should not be undersigned if they did not participate in the preparation and production of the texts, photographs, drawings, illustrations, audio and video recordings.
- If, by changing of the headline, title and subtitle, an editor changed the meaning and intonation of the text, photographs, drawings, illustrations, audio and video recordings, a journalist is obliged to draw attention to the editor, and to require changes. If the editor does not accept requests from the journalist, they have the right to request the omission of signature, or to withdraw the texts, photographs, drawings, illustrations, video and audio recordings.

### 4. An editor is obliged to hear the request of a journalist not to sign the text, photograph, drawings, illustration, audio, or video recordings if the journalist believes that it would endanger their safety.

Guidelines:

- Using pseudonyms should be avoided. If it is information of great importance to the public, or information whose publishing could jeopardise the personal safety of a journalist, the use of a pseudonym is considered justified.

### 5. Archival audio and video recordings must be labelled appropriately.

Guidelines:

- FA photo with a text / report that was not produced at the event that it illustrates, must be marked as archive.
- It is necessary to clearly mark each photo that was not produced at the event but serves to illustrate it.

## **X PROTECTION OF JOURNALISTS**

- 1. A journalist who abides by this Code enjoys the support and protection of their professional associations.**
- 2. A journalist who abides by professional and ethical standards is entitled to legal and material assistance in protection from violence, threats, insults and other negative consequences for performing the journalistic profession.**
- 3. Anyone who feels that a journalist violated any provision of this Code may address the Court of Honour and the Press Council.**



