

# J-SCHOOL STUDENT CODE OF ETHICS AND STANDARDS

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**School of Journalism  
Michigan State University**

Faculty Approved 02/2006  
Faculty Approved 10/2013

## **Preamble**

The faculty of the Michigan State University School of Journalism hold to the highest professional standards of journalism—truth, fairness and accuracy. For this reason and for the compelling needs of the profession, the School expects its students to adhere to these same standards. Accordingly, the faculty of the School developed this “Code of Ethics and Standards,” composed of fundamental journalistic best practices as well as a description of potential consequences for serious Code violations. This Code applies to students in the School of Journalism while engaged in activities related to the mission, values, processes and functions of the School, including participation in journalism courses, J-School-sponsored organizations and external journalism assignments.

As you progress through the J-School program, you will learn the complexities of ethical behavior; for example, some conduct is legally permissible but ethically wrong. We encourage you to ask us about any of the following practices. By the time you graduate, it is the faculty’s expectation that you will have developed a sound foundation to prepare you for the ethical, moral and legal challenges of the profession. This Code is intended to serve as a guide and a foundation for you as a working journalist.

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*This document will be available on the School of Journalism website. Undergraduate students will be introduced to and will review this code in JRN 108: The World of Media and JRN 200: Writing and Reporting News I. Journalism instructors will also refer to this code in their syllabi and students agree they have read and understood this code before taking an internship for credit. Graduate students will be given a copy of the code upon acceptance to the master’s or Ph.D. programs.*

# BEST PRACTICES IN JOURNALISM

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## **REPORTERS and PERSONAL CONDUCT**

- 1. ADVOCACY AND OPINION** Clearly distinguish advocacy from news reporting by labeling articles that include your point of view as analysis and/or commentary.
- 2. ATTRIBUTION** Attribute all material obtained from sources in stories, columns, editorials, photos and illustrations.
- 3. AVOIDING BIAS** Keep an open mind. Do not begin your reporting knowing what you want to come out of it.
- 4. COURSEWORK HONESTY** The School strongly discourages submitting the same or similar work for credit in two or more courses. In a case where you are reporting on the same story for two different classes using two different media, you must seek prior approval from the instructor(s) involved.
- 5. FACT CHECKING** Always double and triple check facts, spelling, addresses and titles for accuracy.
- 6. GRATUITIES** Do not accept “freebies”—gifts or favors. Coffee at a press conference is not a freebie. A lunch at a speech is a freebie. If freebies are sent to you, donate them to a charity.
- 7. PERMISSION** In public places or events such as a park, press conference, rally or protest, it is not necessary to obtain permission from a source to photograph, tape record or videotape. However, in private places, like residence hall rooms, homes, funerals and churches, you should obtain permission to do so. However, if either a tape recorder or a camera is clearly visible and operating, no notification is required. Also, do not use cell phones equipped with cameras to take “undercover” shots, but use them for breaking news photos of newsworthy events you witness.

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## **REPORTERS and THEIR SOURCES**

- 8. ACCURATE QUOTES** When using indirect quotes or paraphrasing, strive to represent the source’s words and meaning accurately. Use a tape recorder or read the quotes back to the source to ensure accuracy. When using direct quotes, you must quote the source accurately.
- 9. APPROPRIATE SOURCES** Avoid using classmates, friends, roommates, family members, etc., as sources for stories. If you are unable to avoid such an interview, you must obtain your instructor’s approval and, whenever possible, be clear when you have used a friend or family member as a source and identify them as such.
- 10. DIVERSITY** Seek diverse sources. Diversity considerations include race, ethnicity, class, physical ability, geography, gender, religion, political orientation, sexual orientation, social status, age, educational background and economic standing.
- 11. IDENTIFICATION** Identify yourself clearly to sources. You should identify yourself as a student reporting or completing an assignment for class, an MSU project, publication or outlet.
- 12. MULTIPLE SOURCES** Do not use single source stories. Always use information from multiple sources from multiple sides of a story. Always make several attempts to contact all key sources, especially those who might come across in a bad light in the story, for the chance to offer their side.

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**REPORTERS  
and THEIR SOURCES, cont.**

**13. NAMING SOURCES** Using an unnamed source requires constant consultation with editors. Such sources should be included only when there is no other way to obtain the information and the information is vital to the story.

**14. OFF THE RECORD** Make every effort to find someone who will go “on the record” with the information. If you agree to go “off the record,” you must respect confidences. (Students should be familiar with the meaning of terms such as “off the record” and “background information,” as defined in these guidelines.)\*

**15. RESPECT** Be respectful when seeking and using interviews or photographs.

**16. NEWS RELEASES** Although it is a news release (printed, video, digital, etc.), students/reporters cannot cut and paste a news release into their stories—they must rewrite the material. Their work must be their own—otherwise, they are passing off someone else’s work as their work. Information, including that from a news release, must be clearly attributed. News releases should be submitted as a news source.

**17. ETIQUETTE** A word of advice . . . sources often ignore emails when the writer fails to adhere to basic email etiquette. When you contact a source, or your instructor, you must follow a protocol before pressing the SEND button:

- Provide an appropriate heading in the SUBJECT line of the email that can be keyworded easily later—e.g. “Jane Smith’s Grade” or “Coal Use Question”
- Begin with a courtesy greeting, called a SALUTATION. Use a title and last name. Unless your recipient has already given you permission to use their first name or signs off with a first name in their emails to you, your salutation should be formal with correct punctuation—e.g. “Dear Dr. Ogundimu,” or “Hello, Professor Ogundimu.” or “Professor Ogundimu,”
- Say why you are writing in the BODY of the email.
- End your message by signing off with a CLOSING and your name, on two separate lines: “Thank you, Jane Smith” or “I appreciate your time, Jane Smith”

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**REPORTERS  
and SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

**18. IDENTIFYING JUVENILES AND VICTIMS** Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims and about identifying victims of sexual assault of any age.

**19. IDENTIFYING ALLEGED PERPETRATORS** Do not use the name of an alleged perpetrator until the prosecutor issues an arrest warrant.

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\*The definitions below are from the University of Queensland’s School of Journalism’s Code of Ethics: “On the record” means the information may be broadcast or published with attribution.

“Off the record” means the information given by a source may not be used—either with or without attribution. Should another source offer the information on the record and independently of the first source, it would okay to use that information.

“Background information” means the information may be used but without attribution to the source.

Entering into an “off-the-record” relationship with a source should be treated with great caution because of the ethical problems involved. You should be very wary of stories that cannot be sourced.

A source will sometimes attempt to apply an “off the record” disclaimer retrospectively. You are not obligated to accede to such an instruction/demand/request.

Be sure to clarify the status of the remarks when the source uses terms like “off the record.” Meanings vary, and it is possible a source may mean “background” or “not for attribution” when using the term “off the record.” Seek a clear understanding of the meaning intended.

# CODE VIOLATIONS

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## **SERIOUS CODE VIOLATIONS**

**1. Do not plagiarize.** Plagiarism occurs when you fail to attribute information, passing it on as your own work.

**2. Do not fabricate information.**

**3. Do not practice “checkbook journalism.”** Do not pay for information other than fees required by local, state or federal authorities, such as materials obtained through the Freedom of Information Act.

**4. Do not go “undercover”** or misrepresent who or what you are without your instructor’s and the Director of the School of Journalism’s prior approval.

**5. Do not alter or distort the content** of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity, however, is permissible. Label photo illustrations, staged photos or re-enactments as such.

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## **PENALTIES FOR CODE VIOLATION(S)**

Students who commit ethical offenses while enrolled in a journalism course may receive one of the following grade penalties, as determined by the instructor in consultation with the Director of the School of Journalism:

- A failing grade on the assignment
- A failing grade in the course.

In addition, the instructor, director or dean may call for an academic disciplinary hearing to impose a sanction in addition to a penalty grade, in accordance with Articles 2.4.6 and 4.3.1.1 of the Academic Freedom for Students at Michigan State University document. Sanctions include, but are not limited to:

- Denial of admission to the School of Journalism as a major. (Journalism preference students who violate the Code may be denied admission to the School as a junior.)
- Dismissal from the School of Journalism as a major.
- Suspension from Michigan State University.

In addition to the Code, students in the School of Journalism are expected to comply with other University policies regarding academic integrity, such as General Student Regulation 1.0, Protection of Scholarship and Grades, and the University policy on Integrity of Scholarship and Grade. (See Spartan Life: Student and Handbook and Resource Guide. )

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## **OTHER CODES OF ETHICS**

The Independent Press Council compiled about 370 journalism codes of ethics adopted by news organizations and societies worldwide. While codes vary, most share these concepts: “truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness and public accountability.” Students are encouraged to review professional codes of ethics authored by the following organizations:

- American Society of Newspaper Editors
- Journalism.org Professional Guidelines and Tools
- Poynter Institute
- Radio-Television News Directors Association and Foundation
- Society of Professional Journalists

# 10 TIPS TO GUIDE SOCIAL MEDIA USE

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The faculty of Michigan State University's School of Journalism extend the highest standards of professional journalism—truth, fairness and accuracy—to the use of Social Media (SM) in gathering, reporting and disseminating news created for J-School courses and J-School sponsored organizations. We recognize the powerful role SM has in mass communication. Thus, we encourage students to use these sites, but only after you have tried to interview multiple sources.



Realize that when you are using these sites for personal and professional reasons, you represent the School of Journalism. General guidelines to follow as you use SM: Think of SM sites as tip generators, not as the only source of information;<sup>i</sup> "Do no harm" and "Avoid the appearance of bias."



Aided by guidelines written by The Associated Press, NPR, Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, students and faculty in MSU's School of Journalism and others, we've provided 10 Best Practices to Guide Social Media Use as an addendum to the J-School Code of Ethics and Standards:



**1.** Never lift quotes, photos or video from social media sites and attribute them to the website address or owner of the site. Do some digging. Most SM sites provide contact information; use the information to email, call or set up a face-to-face interview with the site's owner to explain your story and get new information.<sup>iii iv v</sup>



**2.** When using photos, videos or other multimedia content from social networks in news stories, determine who controls the copyright to the material and get permission from that person or organization to use it.<sup>vi</sup> If appropriate, link the content to the original site.<sup>vii</sup>

**3.** Be transparent with your instructors, supervisors, editors and audience when using information drawn from an SM site or via an email from the site's author. Let them know in the story how and in what context you contacted sources and gathered information and how you verified that information or sought to verify it.<sup>viii</sup>

**4.** Make corrections quickly and be transparent, admitting to and explaining the mistake, and why it needed to be corrected.<sup>ix</sup> If you misunderstood something, acknowledge it.<sup>x</sup>

**5.** Remember that messages on the Internet are public, permanent and Re-Tweet-able. Don't put anything on the Internet that you'd be embarrassed to see on the front page of The New York Times, i.e. inappropriate images or accusations without verified support.<sup>xi</sup> Also, assume that your post will be seen by the target of your criticism and know that like other media, Tweets can give rise to a defamation lawsuit.<sup>xii</sup>

**6.** Avoid the appearance of bias. Friending, liking and following sources are necessary to get information for your stories. If you think it might make you look like partisan, indicate that you are a (student) journalist on your page/bio.<sup>xiii</sup>

**7.** Obtain consent from sources, disclosing who you are, what you are

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## 10 TIPS TO GUIDE SOCIAL MEDIA USE, CONT.

seeking and where your story will and/or could run. The informality of social networking sites makes it easier for potential sources to misunderstand your intentions and the impact of cooperating.<sup>xiv</sup>

**8.** Be cautious when dealing with minors and other vulnerable people who might not fully understand the consequences of cooperating with a journalist. If contacting a child through an SM site, make sure he or she connects you with a responsible adult.<sup>xv</sup>

**9.** Report improper online behavior. It is important for you to engage with those who consume your content. However, if it becomes abusive, bigoted, obscene and/or racist, contact your instructor and campus police immediately.<sup>xvi</sup>

**10.** Protect yourself. If you find it necessary, you may want to manage more than one SM account, one for professional and the other for personal use. Also, consider customizing your privacy settings on your accounts to determine what you share and with whom.<sup>xvii xviii</sup>

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## REFERENCES

<sup>i</sup> Steve Elliott, "Social Media Guidelines for Student Journalists," ASU Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, accessed August 20, 2013, <http://cronkite.asu.edu/node/735>.

<sup>ii</sup> Mandy Jenkins, "Social Media Guidelines to Live By," *Zombie Journalism: Dispatches from the Walking Dead in Today's "Old" Media*, accessed August 20, 2013, <http://zombiejournalism.com/2010/06/social-media-guidelines-to-live-by/>.

<sup>iii</sup> "Social Media Guidelines for AP Employees: Revised May 2013," *Associate Press*, accessed August 20, 2013, [http://www.ap.org/Images/Social-Media-Guidelines\\_tcm28-9832.pdf](http://www.ap.org/Images/Social-Media-Guidelines_tcm28-9832.pdf).

<sup>iv</sup> Elliott, "Social Media Guidelines for Student Journalists."

<sup>v</sup> "NPR Ethics Handbook: Social Media," *NPR*, accessed August 20, 2013, <http://ethics.npr.org/tag/social-media/>

<sup>vi</sup> "Social Media Guidelines for AP Employees."

<sup>vii</sup> Thea Card, feedback from a student in JRN 400 Spartan Online Newsroom, spring 2012.

<sup>viii</sup> Elliott, "Social Media Guidelines for Student Journalists."

<sup>ix</sup> Jenkins, "Social Media Guidelines to Live By."

<sup>x</sup> Gina Masullo, "A Journalist's Guide to the Ethics of Social Media," accessed August 20, 2013, <http://savethemedia.com/2009/10/19/a-journalists-guide-to-the-ethics-of-social-media/>.

<sup>xi</sup> Masullo, "A Journalist's Guide to the Ethics of Social Media."

<sup>xii</sup> Mallary Jean Tenore, "What Journalists Need to Know about Libelous Tweets," last modified August 14, 2011, <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/top-stories/141987/what-journalists-need-to-know-about-libelous-tweets/>.

<sup>xiii</sup> Jenkins, "Social Media Guidelines to Live By."

<sup>xiv</sup> Elliott, "Social Media Guidelines for Student Journalists."

<sup>xv</sup> Elliott, "Social Media Guidelines for Student Journalists."

<sup>xvi</sup> "Social Media Guidelines for AP Employees."

<sup>xvii</sup> "Social Media Guidelines for AP Employees."

<sup>xviii</sup> "NPR Ethics Handbook: Social Media."