

# Guiding Principles for Journalists Covering Science

## Ethical considerations for journalists when covering science-related topics

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*Over 100 science journalists representing more than 20 WFSJ member associations thought about, discussed, and refined a set of ethical principles over seven workshops held in English, French and Spanish. These Guiding Principles can help journalists resolve professional conundrums and offer guidance on best practices when covering science, health, environment, and technology. This is a living document that will continue to be reviewed and revised over time.*

## Principles

### Rigour, accuracy and evidence-based

1. Journalists covering science, like generalist journalists or those specialised in other beats, are **first and foremost doing journalism** – not activism, communication or public relations. Here, we define journalism as rigorous, accurate, fair and independent reportage. Journalism is not meant to advocate or promote any topic, ideology, or person. The distinction between journalistic coverage and opinion must be clear to the public.
2. **Science reporting is evidence-based.** Any media coverage of science, health, technology, environment and other science-related topics must seek to be based on reliable sources.
3. We seek different arguments and expertise and **avoid single-source stories** to produce balanced work. We strive to avoid false balance – giving equal weight to science versus pseudoscience, verified sources versus biased sources, niche opinions or hate speech.

## Sources, diversity and inclusion

4. We **endeavour to include diverse sources** in our coverage and be as inclusive as possible. To achieve that we look at different platforms or ask for help (See Note 1).
5. We take special caution and use **inclusive language** whenever possible, especially when reporting on marginalised and vulnerable communities, by accessing resources that explain best practices and inclusive language toolkits (See Note 1), and asking our sources for preferred language.
6. When including vulnerable sources in stories, we **take particular care to avoid causing direct psychological or physical harm** due to our coverage. We strive to practise informed consent and seek out best practices for how to work with vulnerable sources (whether Indigenous people, minority groups, marginalised communities, victims of violence or any harm, children, and others) (See Note 1).
7. We try to ensure the source is knowledgeable, they **are experts or have expertise specific to the topic** (like people directly affected or Indigenous communities). In sourcing, we avoid discrimination based on geographical, socioeconomic status, ethnic origin, age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, political and other opinions, or age, and endeavour to include underrepresented communities.
8. We are accountable for the work we present. We **identify and attribute credit** to sources and local reporters (fixers or co-producers) who collaborated with us using bylines or credits.
9. We **avoid plagiarism at all costs**. When we refer to content produced by others, we do our best to attribute the information to the original author and the media where it was initially published.
10. Journalists **should not be forced to reveal their sources**, such as confidential sources of information or people at risk, neither in their coverage nor before a court of justice (depending on the laws in our country). We respect citizens' right to intimacy, privacy and image.

## Journalists' independence

11. We foster relationships based on mutual respect with our sources but **preserve a healthy professional distance** to keep an unbiased and critical approach. We seek documentation or other resources to fact-check every piece of information and support the reliability of the person interviewed.

12. Before any interview takes place, journalists are encouraged to explain journalistic practices and norms to sources and proceed only after the source **agrees to the terms of the interview** (this can include whether it will be on the record or off the record; if the source will be named or anonymised; if the journalist allows a third party to be present; if any part of the piece can be discussed before publication). Expectations from both sides should be addressed and clarified in advance.
13. Agreements for source access to the story, quotes or elements of coverage before publication are **to be avoided**. Exceptions may be considered when such access is necessary to follow journalism best practices like to prevent physical or psychological harm when reporting on vulnerable communities or individuals or to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations. In such cases, journalists may consider going through material verbally by phone or videoconference.
14. We **maintain control over framing our coverage and selecting sources** – deciding who the most relevant sources are based on expertise, including scientific expertise and/or the source’s traditional knowledge or lived experience.
15. We choose which sources to include in our work. We have **no obligation to publish content** just because sources spend time talking to us. We can choose not to run the story even after collecting all of the information needed.
16. When looking for funding to cover any science-related topic, we make efforts to **search for independent funding first**, such as from media-related associations, grants, fellowships or unions. We make clear the support doesn’t entitle the organisation to veto or influence our work.
17. Even when accepting grants or other assistance to cover an event or reportage, we do our best to remain independent. We are transparent with the supporting organisation and make clear that **support does not facilitate editorial control over the journalist and coverage** – it doesn’t presuppose benevolent reporting, and there is no guarantee of coverage.

## **Conflicts of interest and transparency**

18. We carefully consider avoiding any conflict of interest. If that’s not possible, we **disclose it transparently to our audience and editor**. Conflicts of interest include, but are not limited to:
  - a. Bribes, commissions, “kickbacks,” gifts, funded trips, or any financial or personal link between source and journalists;
  - b. Funding from governments and corporations for travelling, attending conferences or engaging in other events or activities;

- c. Accepting roles or assignments that compromise their independence and integrity.
19. When we anticipate having a competing or non-neutral interest (personal, financial, ideological or other) we strive to discuss it with the editor/producer before starting the work or publishing it. In some cases, it may preclude us from doing that work.
    - >> For example, if a journalist, their close family members or friends hold securities, shares or roles in a company or organisation.
  20. We try to **scrutinise organisations providing awards and grants** before accepting their prizes – namely, who is funding or providing another kind of support to the organisation, or if the organisation is engaged in biased or unethical practices or activities.
  21. If a journalist also works in communications, marketing or public relations roles they are urged to **refrain from covering work by their employing institution** or its direct competitors. When conducting non-journalistic work, freelance journalists and staff writers are encouraged to be transparent with their editors regarding any potential conflict of interest.
  22. Regarding AI tools, these should be used while applying the same ethical guiding principles presented here, namely rigorous, critical and unbiased reporting; fact-checking and identifying sources of information; inclusive and non-discriminatory coverage; disclosure of conflicting interests and transparency about such use.
  23. Journalists are encouraged to follow the AI editorial guidelines of the media they are working for or that were advised by the editor, if these guidelines don't conflict with the journalist's ethical values or ethical guiding principles for journalists.
  24. Whenever advisable, we **share with the editor the AI tools or strategies used to produce the work** and **disclose to our audience the use of AI tools** such as text generation, image processing, speech recognition, language translation, data analysis and/or decision making.
  25. Freelance journalists are free to pitch their stories to more than one outlet. Journalists are advised not to pitch an exclusive story or a first-hand story to more than one media outlet simultaneously.

### **Correcting errors**

26. Upon discovering an error was made in the work produced, we do our best effort to **immediately alert the outlet and ask for a correction to be made**. Ideally, the correction is pinpointed and displayed at the end of the article or broadcasted piece

noting the date and nature of correction, or in any appropriate form considering the format (text, audio, video, multimedia).

If publishing a correction depends on the editor and media outlet and not on the journalist, we can keep records of having requested the correction and may consider publishing an independent correction in a public forum like social media, our professional website, or some other printed or online format.

27. Whenever possible, we can consider doing a **follow-up story when scientists and other stakeholders are found innocent after accusations of fraud.**

If commissioning such a story depends on the editor and media outlet and not on the journalist, we are urged to warn the editor in charge and ask them to flag the original piece (and keep a copy of the communication). If it is appropriate, a note about the follow-up or changes to the original story can also be published in a public forum like social media, our professional website, or some other printed or online format.

28. Whenever possible, we consider doing a **follow-up story if a paper we reported on is retracted.** Retraction must be commented on and put in context, explaining its reason (which is not always fraud).

If commissioning such a story depends on the editor and media outlet and not on the journalist, we are urged to warn the editor in charge and ask them to flag the original piece (and keep a copy of the communication). If it is appropriate, a note about the retraction can also be published in a public forum like social media, our professional website, or some other printed or online format.

## **Security and safety**

29. Some environmental, medical or other science-related topics may expose journalists to economically, politically and socially influential people, who can try to harm them. First and foremost, we ensure our safety and personal security. Whenever needed, we seek best practice guides on safety and security or direct support (See Note 1).

30. Journalists are encouraged to check their contracts carefully regarding indemnity, life and health insurance as well as legal support.

31. When covering health situations or natural disasters, journalists have the right (and are encouraged to) adhere to safety protocols in place and follow instructions from crisis response personnel. However, when security measures are in place and followed, journalists should not be prevented from doing their jobs.

32. Freelance journalists (and staff writers) can reasonably expect prompt and helpful communications from editors, an understanding that editors will not appropriate the

contents of a freelancer's original pitch and assign it to staff writers, and fair and timely payment for their work from media organisations they report for (See Note 1).

**Note 1:** *find additional readings on the website page "Other resources when covering science"*

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