

# Quebec Press Council Guide of Journalistic Ethics

## Preamble

- a) Whereas the free flow of information is one of the most important guarantees of liberty and democracy;
- b) Whereas freedom of the press derives from the fundamental freedoms of thought, speech, free expression and opinion, and is widely legally recognized so nationally and internationally, and as such no one must dictate content to news media;
- c) Whereas freedom of the press entails that journalists and news media have sole prerogative to control all aspects of editorial freedom relating to content, form, and timing of publication of information;
- d) Whereas the public's right to information is the legitimate right of the public to be informed of issues of public interest and, to fulfill this right, the role of journalists is to report, edit, analyze and publish such information with complete independence;
- e) Whereas the notion of the public interest is variable to different cultures and eras and this pursuit of the public interest entails journalists' access to privileged information vital to responding to the political, economic, social, and cultural concerns of citizens to allow them informed participation in the life of a democracy;
- f) Whereas journalists and news media are first and foremost servants of the public, and the public's right to information supersedes any other considerations regarding editorial choices;
- g) Whereas journalists and news media ought in all situations to provide the public with reliable information;
- h) Whereas the public's right to information is foundational to journalistic ethics;
- i) Whereas, in order to ensure the full exercise of freedom of the press and the public's right to information, the Press Council has been specifically founded to hear public complaints concerning journalistic ethics;
- j) Whereas, in order to hear and adjudicate such complaints, the ethical principles guiding journalism must be set down;
- k) Whereas the standards set forth in this Guide create first and foremost an obligation of means for journalists and news media;
- l) The Quebec Press Council has adopted the following Guide of ethics.

## Section A: Purpose and scope of this Guide

### 1. Purpose

This Guide sets forth ethical standards concerning the practice of journalism in Quebec.

## **2. Definitions**

For the purposes of these guidelines, the terms below shall have the following meanings:

- a) "Journalist": any person who exercises journalistic duties with the objective of serving the public interest; who researches, collects, fact-checks, edits, comments on or disseminates information about matters of general interest aimed at a broad audience
- b) "News media entity": any entity, regardless of its legal status and the units it comprises, that publishes or broadcasts a publication or programs of a journalistic nature, in Quebec, or that produces or broadcasts journalistic material on behalf of others, regardless of medium, subject to exceptions as defined by the Quebec Press Council.

## **3. Scope**

This Guide applies equally to journalists and to news media.

## **4. Implementation**

- (1) News media must ensure this Guide is applied, complied with, and upheld at all times. They must continuously endeavour to promote this Guide of journalistic ethics with their staffs, and ensure they not compel journalists, whatever their affiliation with the organization, to resort to practices contrary to this Guide.
- (2) By this Guide, news media are entirely responsible for all journalistic content they choose to publish or broadcast on any given platform or social media account, regardless of the medium used.
- (3) Though news media are responsible for the content they publish and broadcast, journalists are nonetheless accountable for their actions and responsible for the journalistic work they produce, regardless of the medium used.

## **5. Process**

- (1) Any natural or legal person may lodge a complaint with the Quebec Press Council for an alleged violation of the principles this Guide by a journalist or news outfit.
- (2) Complaints are dealt with according to the Quebec Press Council rules and sanctions, where appropriate, are imposed according the same rules.

## **Section B: Independence**

### **6. Independence and integrity**

Journalists must avoid, in both their professional and personal lives, any behavior, engagement, function or task that could impair their ability to perform their duties with independence and integrity.

#### **6.1 Conflict of interest**

(1) Journalists must avoid any conflict of interest, real or perceived, and must exhibit a high degree of personal integrity at all times.

(2) News media must avoid placing their journalists in situations of conflict of interest, either real or perceived.

#### **6.2 Political, ideological and commercial influences**

News media shall under no circumstances let their commercial, political, ideological or other interests outweigh the public's right to information of quality or restrain the professional independence of their journalists.

#### **6.3 Disguised advertising**

News media must avoid any form of indirect or disguised advertising in reporting news or information.

#### **6.4 Abuse of professional status**

Journalists must not use their professional status or any information they gather while performing their duties, nor shall hide or withhold information in order to garner personal advantages or privileges, or benefit their families, friends or anyone else.

#### **6.5 Gifts and gratuities**

Journalists must refuse gifts and gratuities offered to them in a professional context, unless they are of little value or serve directly for a journalistic assignment.

## **6.6 Paid travel**

Journalists may not accept paid travel or travel expenses from a third party for an assignment, unless the payment is explicitly disclosed in the story, or if the travel is specifically for training purposes.

## **7. Byline**

News media must recognize that journalists are free to sign their own work and must never be pressured to sign a piece that has been substantially altered.

## **8. Journalistic material**

Journalists and news media do not disclose their notes, drafts, and records to third parties, unless compelled to by law, or when overwhelmingly in the public interest.

## **Section C: Pursuing the truth**

### **9. Qualitative characteristics of information**

Depending on the type of journalism, news and information pieces produced by journalists and news media should possess the following qualities:

- a) accuracy: fidelity to the truth;
- b) removed in 2022;
- c) impartiality: providing an unbiased point of view;
- d) balance: striving to present all sides of a story;
- e) completeness: presenting all the facts and information essential to understanding;  
while preserving editorial freedom.

### **10. Types of journalism**

(1) There are essentially two types of journalism, each with its own ethical requirements: objective reporting and opinion pieces.

(2) The public must easily be able to identify which type so as not to be misled in any way.

## **10.1 Factual journalism**

- (1) Factual journalism reports facts and events and contextualizes them.
- (2) Such information must be accurate, impartial, balanced and complete, as defined in article 9 of this Guide.

## **10.2 Opinion journalism**

- (1) In opinion pieces, journalists have great latitude with their choice of tone and style. They may express personal points of view, take sides, and provide criticism, comments and opinions.
- (2) Opinion journalists ought to describe the relevant facts on which they base their opinions, unless these facts are already common knowledge. They also have a duty to share their reasoning.
- (3) The information reported must be accurate and complete, as defined in article 9 of this Guide.

## **11. Reliability of information from sources**

Journalists must take reasonable means to assess the reliability of information from sources in order to ensure the public receives reliable information.

## **12. Identifying sources**

Journalists must fully identify their sources so the public can make an informed evaluation of the reliability of the information reported, except as provided by article 12.1 of this Guide.

### **12.1 Anonymous sources**

- (1) Journalists may resort to using anonymous sources when the following three conditions are met:
  - (a) the information is in the public interest
  - (b) the information cannot be obtained by any other reasonable means
  - (c) the source may suffer harm if revealed.

(2) Journalists who agree to conceal the identity of a source must however provide sufficient information in their story so the public can evaluate the source's credibility, but without compromising the source's anonymity.

### **13. Agreements with a source**

(1) Journalists must try to respect, by all means at their disposal, any agreement between themselves and a source to whom they have explicitly agreed (confidentiality, off the record, not for attribution, embargo, etc.), unless the source has knowingly deceived them.

(2) Journalists may however publish information covered by a confidentiality agreement if they have obtained such information otherwise.

(3) Journalists may reveal the identity of a source to a senior editor equally committed to respecting the confidentiality agreement. This is standard journalistic practice and is in no way equivalent to naming a source publicly.

#### **13.1 Sources' right to review**

(1) Journalists should not give to their sources a right of review the contents of an upcoming publication or broadcast.

(2) On their own initiative, journalists may choose to submit certain elements of a story to a source in order to verify accuracy.

#### **13.2 Paying sources**

Journalists and news media must not offer payment to a source in exchange for information, except for fees paid to experts and guest commentators.

### **14. Presenting information**

Journalists and news media must respect the integrity and accuracy of information in how they choose to present and illustrate it.

#### **14.1 Sensationalism**

Journalists and news media must not distort reality in any way by embellishing or misrepresenting the significance of the facts or events they report.

#### **14.2 Clear distinction between ads and news**

News media must clearly delineate between news and advertising in order to avoid confusing the public.

#### **14.3 Illustrations, headlines, titles and captions**

The choice and use of materials that complement or frame a news story, such as photos, video, illustrations, headlines, titles or captions, must accurately reflect the content.

#### **14.4 Edits and archival material**

(1) Journalists and news media must not edit photos or video for publication or broadcast if such edits compromise the integrity or alter the meaning of the events to which they are related.

(2) Journalists and news media must clearly identify any archival material and photo-illustrations if there is a risk the public could misinterpret them.

#### **14.5 Reenactments and staging**

(1) When journalists and news media resort to reenactments or staging, they must render the facts, opinions and emotions surrounding the events as faithfully as possible.

(2) Journalists and news media must clearly inform the public when using such techniques, unless the reenactment or staging is insignificant.

#### **14.6 Plagiarism**

Journalists and news media must never plagiarize.

### **15. Polls and research**

Journalists and news media that broadcast or publish polls and surveys must disclose all pertinent methodological information. Those with and without statistical validity must be clearly distinguished.

## **16. User content**

(1) News media that choose to include content submitted by the public must attempt to feature a variety of viewpoints.

(2) If news media choose to edit content submitted by the public, they must be careful not to distort the author's opinions.

(3) News media must take reasonable measures to ensure that such content is not discriminatory and does not tarnish or violate the dignity or private lives of any individual.

### **16.1 Refusal to publish**

News media may refuse to publish or broadcast user submissions, as long as such refusal is not biased, or the result of a will to suppress information of public interest.

\*Article removed March 25th 2022.

## **Section D: Respect for individuals and groups**

### **17. Fairness**

News media and journalists must treat fairly any person or group featured in a story, or with whom they have interacted.

(1) News media and journalists must respect the individual's fundamental right to privacy and dignity.

### **18. Right to privacy and dignity**

(2) When in the public interest, news media and journalists may deem the public's right to know outweighs such rights.

#### **18.1 Human tragedy**

News media and journalists must show restraint and respect for individuals and the families of those struck by tragedy or grief. They must not harass them and respect any decision to decline an interview.

#### **18.2 Offending sensibilities**



(1) Journalists and news media should refrain from unnecessarily publishing or broadcasting images and other content that may be offensive to some members of the public.

(2) If the format allows for it, journalists and news media should include a content advisory warning informing the public of shocking images or content.

## **19. Discrimination**

(1) Journalists and news media must avoid the use of terms and depictions to designate any person or group in an attempt to discriminate, spread or inspire hatred, encourage violence or fuel prejudice.

(2) Journalists and news media should not refer to a person's race, religion, sexual orientation, handicap or other personal characteristics unless relevant to the story.

## **20. Legal cases**

Journalists and news media must exercise caution and fairness in the coverage of judicial and police matters, given the severity of consequences that could result from such coverage.

### **20.1 Right to fair trial and the presumption of innocence**

(1) Journalists and news media must respect the right of any person to a fair trial and to the presumption of innocence.

(2) In the absence of formal charges, journalists and news media must exercise especial caution before publicly naming those suspected of illegal acts.

### **20.2 Follow-up of legal cases**

Whenever possible, journalists and news media must follow up and make the public aware of the outcome of judicial cases.

### **20.3 Criminal records**

Journalists and news media should not mention the criminal record of a person who is not the subject of legal proceedings, unless such information is in the public interest.

### **20.4 Relatives of the accused or convicted**

Journalists and news media must refrain from naming relatives of persons accused or convicted of crimes, unless such information is in the public interest.

## **21. Naming victims of accidents or crimes**

(1) Journalists and news media must not publish or broadcast photographs or any information that could reveal the identity of a victim of an accident or criminal act unless they are certain next of kin have been notified.

(2) Journalists and news media must not reveal the names or families of victims of sexual offenses, except under exceptional circumstances such as when the victim expressly waives the right to confidentiality.

## **22. Identifying minors involved in legal cases**

(1) Journalists and news media must not publish any details that could reveal the identity of a minor accused of a crime, unless it is overwhelmingly in the public interest.

(2) Journalists and news media must not publish any details that could reveal the identity of a minor involved in a legal matter as a victim or witness, unless it is overwhelmingly in the public interest, the minor has consented in a free and informed manner and is accompanied by a responsible adult.

### **22.1 Identifying minors not involved in legal cases**

(1) Even for those minors not involved in a legal matter, journalists and news media must not publish any details that could reveal their identity if it could jeopardize their safety or development.

(2) Any exception to this principle must be justified by an overwhelming public interest, and in addition, the minor must provide free and informed consent and should be accompanied by a responsible adult.

## **23. Blackmail and intimidation**

Journalists and news media must never coerce sources with blackmail, intimidation or harassment.

## **24. Identifying oneself as a journalist**

Journalists must perform their duties and gather information professionally, in a transparent manner, by identifying themselves as journalists, with exceptions noted in article 25 of this Guide.

## **25. Clandestine methods**

(1) Journalists may choose to use clandestine methods while gathering information when both the following conditions are met:

- (a) the public interest demands it, and
- (b) a forthcoming approach would most likely fail.

(2) If information is collected in a private location, journalists must also have credible information indicating the likelihood of illegal or antisocial activities or breach of trust.

(3) Journalists and news media must disclose the use of clandestine methods, should it be the case, upon publication or broadcast.

(4) When information is collected in a private setting using clandestine methods, journalists and news media must, in the interest of fairness and balance, allow those whose statements or account of events have been reported a right to respond before publication or broadcast.

## **26. Vulnerable persons**

Journalists must exercise especial caution when reporting on those in vulnerable situations.

## **27. Dealing with the public**

Journalists and news media must be courteous when interacting with the public.

### **27.1 Correcting errors**

Journalists and news media must diligently correct their failings and mistakes, whether by correction, retraction or by offering a right of reply to the persons or groups concerned, in order to redress the situation satisfactorily and quickly.