
QUEBEC

PRESS COUNCIL

GUIDE

OF

JOURNALISM

ETHICS

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ETHICS

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5 About the Quebec Press Council

7 **Preamble**

SECTION A :

13 **Purpose and Scope
of this Guide**

SECTION B :

19 **Independence**

SECTION C :

25 **Pursuit of Truth**

SECTION D :

37 **Respect for Individuals
and Groups**

About the Quebec Press Council

The Quebec Press Council is a private non-profit organization that defends press freedom and the right of the public to quality news and information. Its scope extends to all news media organizations that publish or broadcast in Quebec, whether they operate in print, radio, television or digital media and regardless of whether they are contributing members of the Council.

The Council handles complaints from the public regarding journalistic work and determines whether the standards of this Guide have been breached. In no way can the Council be associated with a tribunal. It has no regulative jurisdiction and no judicial, legislative or coercive power. The Council issues decisions that are strictly of a moral nature.

The Quebec Press Council was founded in 1973 on the initiative of journalists and media organizations, who were joined from the beginning by representatives of the public. The Council is a tripartite organization. Its board of directors and its committees are composed of journalists, members appointed by media organizations and members of the public.

Media membership to the Council is on a voluntary basis. As a self-regulatory body, the Council is independent from governmental authority.

PREAMBLE

Preamble

- a) Whereas the free flow of information is one of the most important guarantees of freedom and democracy;
- b) Whereas freedom of the press derives from the fundamental freedoms of thought, speech, expression and opinion that are widely recognized in legal documents, on national and international levels, and that no one can dictate the content of information to the news media;
- c) Whereas freedom of the press requires that news media and journalists have editorial freedom and therefore that choices relating to the content, form, time of publication or dissemination of information is the prerogative of the news media and journalists;
- 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 guarantee this right, the role of journalists is to report, edit, analyze and publish such information with complete independence;
- e) Whereas the notion of public interest varies according to each society and each era and that respect for the public interest leads journalists and news media to favour information that can address the political, economic, social and cultural concerns of citizens so that they can participate in an informed manner in democratic life;

- f) Whereas journalists and the news media serve first and foremost the public and that, in their editorial choices or treatment, the public's right to information takes precedence over all other considerations;
- g) Whereas journalists and the news media must strive, in all situations, to offer the public quality information;
- h) Whereas journalists and the news media act in a transparent manner regarding their use of artificial intelligence (AI);
- i) Whereas the public's right to information is foundational to journalism ethics;
- j) Whereas, in order to ensure the full exercise of press freedom and the public's right to information, the Press Council has been particularly founded to hear complaints from the public relating to journalism ethics;
- k) Whereas to hear and decide on such complaints, the ethical standards that guide the practice of journalism must be set down;
- l) Whereas journalists and news media must first and foremost take reasonable steps to meet the standards set out in this document;
- m) The Quebec Press Council has adopted the following ethical standards.

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, exercising journalistic functions and having the objective of serving the public, researches, collects, verifies, processes, comments or disseminates information intended for a wide audience, on questions of general interest;
- b) “News media”: 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 the medium used, subject to exceptions as defined by the Quebec Press Council.

3 — Scope

This Guide applies to journalists and news media.

4 ___ Implementation

- 1) The news media must ensure that the standards provided for in this Guide are respected and applied. They must not evade these standards at any time or force journalists, regardless of the legal status which binds them, to resort to practices contrary to the provisions of this Guide. They must promote ethical standards among their staff.
- 2) For the purposes of this Guide, news media are entirely responsible for all journalistic content they produce, publish or broadcast regardless of the medium used, which includes the social media accounts they operate.
- 3) The responsibility of the news media for what they produce, publish or broadcast does not relieve journalists of their own responsibilities concerning their journalistic actions and productions, regardless of the medium used.

5 ___ Process

- 1) Any natural or legal person may file a complaint with the Quebec Press Council regarding alleged breaches of the provisions of this Guide by a journalist or news media.

- 2) Complaints are processed according to the rules set out by the Quebec Press Council and the sanction, if applicable, will be imposed according to these same rules.

SECTION B

INDEPENDENCE

6 ____ Independence and Integrity

Journalists must avoid, in both their professional and personal lives, any behavior, commitment, function or task that could impair their duty of independence and integrity.

6.1 ____ Conflict of Interest

- 1) Journalists must avoid any conflict of interest or appearance of conflict of interest. They must behave with integrity in all situations.
- 2) The news media must ensure that their journalists do not find themselves in a situation of conflict of interest or appearance of conflict of interest.

6.2 ____ Influence of Political, Ideological and Commercial Concerns

The news media must under no circumstances let their commercial, political, ideological or other interests take precedence over the legitimate interest of the public in quality information, nor restrict the professional independence of journalists.

6.3 — Disguised Advertising

Journalists and news media must avoid disguised or indirect advertising in their processing of information.

6.4 — Taking Advantage of Professional Status

Journalists must not use their professional status or any information collected in the exercise of their functions, nor silence or disseminate information, in order to obtain personal advantages or privileges, or to benefit their families, friends or any other person.

6.5 — Gifts and Gratuities

Journalists must refuse gifts and gratuities offered to them in the course of their duties, unless they are of little value and are used to carry out journalistic work.

6.6 — Free Travel

Free travel and third-party financial contributions to cover travel expenses may only be accepted if the journalist's reporting explicitly mentions it or if the travel is solely for training purposes and professional development.

7 — Byline

The news media recognize that journalists are free to sign the texts they produce and cannot be forced to sign one of their reports if it has been substantially modified.

8 — Journalistic Material

Journalists and news media do not hand over their journalistic material to third parties unless they are required to do so by law or if there is an overriding public interest in doing so.

SECTION C

PURSUIT

OF TRUTH

9 ____ Qualitative Characteristics of Information

Journalists and news media produce, depending on journalistic genres, information content which possesses the following qualities:

- a) Accuracy: faithfulness to reality;
- b) Impartiality: absence of bias in favour of a particular point of view;
- c) Balance: in the treatment of a subject, presentation of a fair weighting of the points of view of the parties involved;
- d) Completeness: in the treatment of a subject, presentation of the elements essential to its proper understanding, while respecting the editorial freedom of the media.

10 ____ Journalistic Genres

- 1) There are essentially two journalistic genres, each with its own specific requirements: factual journalism and opinion journalism.
- 2) The journalistic genre that is being practiced must be easily identifiable so that the public is not misled.

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) Opinion journalists express their points of view, comments, positions, criticisms or opinions. In order to do so, they have great latitude in their choice of tone and style.
- 2) Opinion journalists ought to present the most relevant facts on which they base their opinion, unless these are already known to the public, and must explain the reasoning which justifies it.
- 3) The information provided by opinion journalists must be accurate and complete, as defined in article 9 of this Guide.

11 — Reliability of Information Transmitted by Sources

Journalists must take reasonable means to assess the reliability of the information transmitted by their sources in order to guarantee quality information to the public.

12 — Identification of Sources

Journalists must identify their sources of information in order to allow the public to assess their value, subject to the provisions set out in article 12.1 of this Guide.

12.1 — Use of Confidential Sources

- 1) Journalists may resort to using confidential sources when the following three conditions are met:
 - a) The information serves the public interest;
 - b) The information cannot be obtained by other reasonable means;
 - c) The source may suffer harm if their identity is revealed.

- 2) Journalists who agree to conceal the identity of a source must sufficiently describe the source in their report so that the public can appreciate the value and credibility of this source, without disclosing elements that could allow its identification.

13 ____ Communication Agreements with a Source

- 1) Journalists must try to respect, by all means at their disposal, communication agreements with a source (confidentiality, off the record, non-attribution, embargo, etc.) for which they have given their explicit consent, unless the source has intentionally deceived them.
- 2) Journalists may, however, publish information that is the subject of a communication agreement if they obtain the same 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 publicly revealing a source's identity.

13.1 ____ Sources' Right to Review

- 1) Journalists do not grant their source any right to review the content of an upcoming publication or broadcast.
- 2) Journalists may, however, on their own initiative, submit certain elements of a news report to their source in order to verify accuracy.

13.2 ____ Remuneration of Sources

Journalists and news media do not pay any remuneration to people who agree to provide information, except when it is a fee paid to an expert or guest commentator.

14 ____ Presentation of Information

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

14.1 — Sensationalism

Journalists and news media must not distort reality by exaggerating or misinterpreting the true significance of the facts and events they report.

14.2 — Clear Distinction Between Advertising and Information

The news media must make a clear distinction between journalistic information and advertising in order to avoid any confusion about the nature of the information that is transmitted to the public.

14.3 — Illustrations, Headlines, Titles and Captions

The choice and treatment of elements accompanying or adorning information, such as photographs, videos, illustrations, headlines, titles and captions, must reflect the information to which these elements relate.

14.4 — Edits and Archival Material

- 1) Journalists and news media must not edit photos or video material they publish or broadcast if such edits alter the meaning of the events to which they relate.

- 2) Journalists and news media must identify archival material and picture editing whenever there is a risk of confusion for the public.

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 recreated events as faithfully as possible.
- 2) Journalists and news media must clearly inform the public of the use of such a process, unless the reenactment or staging is insignificant.

14.6 — Plagiarism

Journalists and news media do not engage in plagiarism.

14.7 — Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

- 1) Editorial Control: The news media ensure that a human being exerts editorial control over AI-generated content before publishing or broadcasting it.
- 2) Identification of Content Produced by Generative AI: All texts, images and sound elements substantially generated by artificial

intelligence must be clearly identified as such in order to avoid any doubt regarding the nature of the information provided to the public. This identification must be embedded in the content and, wherever possible, inseparable from it to prevent the AI-generated content from being shared without proper identification.

15 — Polls and Research

When broadcasting polls, journalists and news media must provide the public with the methodological elements of the survey and other relevant elements. They must clearly distinguish between polls that have scientific value and those that do not.

16 — Public Contributions

- 1) The news media that choose to include content submitted by the public must attempt to feature a variety of viewpoints.
- 2) News media may make edits to content submitted by the public, but in doing so they must be careful not to change the meaning or distort the author's opinions.

- 3) News media must take reasonable measures to ensure that content submitted by the public respects the dignity and privacy of individuals and is not discriminatory.

16.1 — Refusal to Publish

News media may refuse to publish or broadcast content submitted by the public, provided that their refusal is not motivated by bias or the desire to silence information of public interest.

SECTION D

RESPECT

FOR INDIVIDUALS

AND GROUPS

17 ___ Fairness

Journalists and news media must treat the people and groups they report on or interact with fairly.

18 ___ Protection of Privacy and Dignity

- 1) Journalists and news media respect the fundamental right of everyone to privacy and dignity.
- 2) Journalists and news media may prioritize the public's right to information when matters affecting a person's privacy or dignity are of public interest.

18.1 ___ Human Tragedy

Journalists and news media must show restraint and respect towards individuals who have just been struck by tragedy or grief, as well as their close relatives. They must not harass them and must respect their refusal to grant an interview.

18.2 — Public Sensitivity

- 1) Journalists and news media should refrain from unnecessarily publishing or broadcasting distressing images or content.
- 2) If the format permits, journalists and news media should include a content advisory warning the public of distressing images or content.

19 — Discrimination

- 1) Journalists and news media must refrain from using, towards any person or group, representations or terms which tend, on the basis of a discriminatory motive, to:
 - fuel prejudices and/or
 - arouse or stir up contempt or hatred and/or
 - encourage violence.
- 2) Journalists and news media should not refer to a person's race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or other personal characteristics unless they are 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 a Fair Trial and Presumption of Innocence

- 1) Journalists and news media must respect the right of any individual to the presumption of innocence and to a fair and equitable trial.
- 2) In the absence of formal charges, journalists and news media must exercise rigor and caution before publicly identifying individuals suspected of illegal acts.

20.2 — Follow-up of Legal Cases

Whenever possible, journalists and news media must follow up and report the outcome of court cases in order to make them known to the public.

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 individuals accused or convicted of crimes, unless such information is in the public interest.

21 ____ Identification of Victims of Accidents or Criminal Acts

- 1) Journalists and news media must not publish or broadcast images or information allowing the identification of victims of accidents or criminal acts if they do not have the assurance that their close relatives have already been notified.
- 2) Journalists and news media must refrain from identifying victims of sexual offenses and their relatives, unless there are exceptional circumstances, including when a victim of sexual offense expressly requests the lifting of this protection.

22 ____ Identification of Minors Involved in a Judicial Context

- 1) Journalists and news media must refrain from publishing any mention likely to enable the identification of a minor accused in a legal context, unless there is an overriding public interest in doing so.
- 2) Journalists and news media must refrain from publishing any mention likely to allow the identification of a minor involved in a legal context as a victim or witness, unless there is an overriding public interest in doing so, that this person consents to it in a free and informed manner and that he or she is accompanied by responsible adults.

22.1 ____ Identification of Minors Outside the Judicial Context

- 1) Outside of the judicial context, journalists and news media must refrain from publishing any information likely to allow the identification of minors when this could compromise their security and development.

- 2) Any exception to this principle must be justified by an overriding public interest and also requires free and informed consent, as well as the support and accompaniment of responsible adults.

23 ___ Blackmail and Intimidation

Journalists and news media do not engage in blackmail, intimidation or harassment of their news sources.

24 ___ Identifying Oneself as a Journalist

Journalists carry out their functions by identifying themselves openly as journalists and collect information by proven means of journalism, subject to the provisions set out in article 25 of this Guide.

25 ___ Undercover Methods

- 1) Journalists may use undercover methods while gathering information when both of the following conditions are met:
 - a) The public interest requires it, and
 - b) The likelihood exists that an open approach to gathering information would fail.
- 2) If information is collected in a private location, journalists must also have credible information indicating the likelihood of illegal or anti-social activities or a breach of trust.
- 3) Journalists and news media must inform the public that they have used undercover methods when they present information gathered in this manner.
- 4) When information is collected in a private setting using undercover methods, journalists and news media must, for the sake of fairness and balance, allow those whose statements or account of events have been reported a right to respond before publication or broadcast.

26 ____ Individuals in Vulnerable Situations

Journalists must exercise caution before publishing or broadcasting comments from individuals in vulnerable situations.

27 ____ Interactions with the Public

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

28 ____ Correction of Errors

Journalists and news media must diligently correct their shortcomings and errors, whether by rectification, retraction or by granting a right of reply to the persons or groups concerned, so as to repair these errors fully and quickly.

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