A CODE OF PRACTICE

FOR

JOURNALISTS
A Code of Practice for journalists was adopted by the General Body of Editors Guild of India at a meeting held in New Delhi on August 30, 2002.

Revised in August 2007 to incorporate implementation of suggestions in the Code.
Why a Code in the first place?

Journalists resist any kind of “code” for their profession as it is something repugnant to the freedom of expression.

But a good code imposes no fetters. It may only flag some pitfalls discovered by those who have gone before, so that those who follow may anticipate and avoid them. That way useful guidelines will emerge and freedom will grow without running into aberrations. It may not be a mere coincidence that journalism has progressed most in those countries which also have evolved such codes diligently. That is why this Code has been named Code of Practice, and not Code of Conduct.

Print and electronic media capture news as it breaks, but they also are recorders of change. It will be odd if they were to show reluctance to record the changes that take place in their own field. Journalists must take note of changes and profit from precedents, and in doing so they must sift the more relevant and useful from the less relevant because no code can be universal or everlasting. All occupations must benefit from experience for avoiding wrong practices which might have crept in, because such undesirable practices become settled habits. Since journalism is a profession where its product is put together on a minute or hourly basis, mistakes are best seen from a distance from the rush of events. A Code is an index of what is seen in this way to be desirable or otherwise. It makes the recurrence of past mistakes less likely and expands the scope for error-free innovation in the future.
That is why the Code adopted by the Editors Guild of India has drawn liberally from an existing one prepared by Britain’s Society of Editors, while at the same time the members of the Guild have been equally liberal in modifying the British Code in the light of India’s own experience.

Much of the Code is addressed to media workers in the field and on the desk. This is where the rush of work makes the habit of correct judgement a more useful aid to both speed and safety. But it is also addressed to Editors, upon whom rests the responsibility of inculcating these habits in their colleagues in circumstances which have special angularities in India.

Among all countries which cherish freedom of the press, India has the maximum overlap between two entities which are often, though not always correctly, regarded as adversaries: the government of the day and the media.

The overlap is extensive, sometimes troublesome, for such media whose owners and managers have interests which live in ambivalent proximity to the political powers of the day. The interaction between the government and the owners/managers does not always make life easy for editors of such media. Therefore, in addition to formulating a Code of Practice, an organisation like Editors Guild should help to promote such institutions as can shield the Editor from the inclement effects of the interaction between the political power-holders and the owners/managers. Faithful observance of the Code of Practice, monitored by the Guild and similar organisations, will certainly improve the climate.
The credentials of the media

The fact that the media are guided by a self-imposed Code strengthens their credentials for demanding protection of their right to receive and impart information.

Media organisations and journalists would be strengthened further if the media eschewed more scrupulously any actions which would even remotely suggest that, in exercising the right to receive and impart information, they were beholden to special interests and groups for perks and favours, and were thereby allowing their judgement to be swayed.

Particularly relevant in this respect are such favours as invitations for foreign visits and travel, whether from governments, industrial and commercial organisations, or other centres of power and patronage.

It might be difficult to forego them entirely, because in that case the less affluent among the media might not be able to provide even unbiased coverage of many events. But three kinds of precaution should be taken;

First, the better-off media should set an example in providing self-supporting coverage. Second, where there is a choice between accepting offers of such facilities or denying suitable coverage to the reader/viewer, the media concerned should acknowledge that such facilities have been offered and accepted. Third, the offer should be made directly to the Editor, leaving it to him to decide whom to depute for the coverage to keep it free from extraneous considerations.
The Editor’s domain

As the ultimate custodian of the personality of the paper/channel he edits, the Editor rightly gets all the blame and credit. But four aspects of his role stand out the most. The hardest to define but nevertheless essential is that the publication must maintain and promote high standards of good taste. The publication/electronic channel may also aim at entertaining its customers, in addition to informing them. The more the mainstream media shift towards the kind of “entertainment” which was once the stock in trade of “glossies”, the less they will be able to claim privileges in the name of the freedom of the press.

The other three aspects of the role of the Editor are easier to explain.

Maintaining the credibility of the publication/electronic channel: Whatever its professed beliefs, stance, or role, the publication/electronic channel can maintain them only to the extent it sustains its credibility for presenting facts honestly, and commenting on them fairly, without any bias. Intentional misstatement of facts and biased comment are not the only enemies of credibility. Sensationalism is another, because it distorts the perspective and meaning of what is reported. The publication/electronic channel may gain attention and popularity one day, but practised over a period of time, sensationalism undermines the public’s confidence in the editorial judgement of the publication/electronic channel.
Accuracy: Respect for accuracy is a better prop of popularity than sensationalism. It also serves better the people’s right to know. That right implies that the people must be given the facts first, unmixed with comment and value judgement. There must be a place for the latter as well, but separately from the narration of facts, preferably in the space/time clearly set aside for comment, but at least separated from the facts in news item/bulletin even if it has to be within the same space/time.

Reliable facts should take precedence over conjecture and implied comments in the presentation of news. That only enhances the Editor’s capacity and his obligation to resist suppression of facts, along with his peers and organisations like the Editors Guild. One part of this obligation is to resist laws requiring disclosures of sources except where a clearly higher cause intervenes.

But it is also a part of the Editor’s obligation to ensure that firstly, he lends his full weight to the functioning of peer organisations by actively participating in them; secondly, he publishes/broadcasts fairly and fully any proceedings of organisations which relate to any inquiry into his own or his publication/channel’s conduct; thirdly, he publishes correction of incorrect reports and apologises whenever an apology is called for; and fourthly, no member of his staff allows personal interests or any favours done to him to colour his work for the publication/channel.

More than that, it is also the Editor’s obligation to inculcate respect for all such obligations in the minds of the staff of the publication/channel. Much of the work of the staff has to be
done at a time when the Editor is not readily accessible for consultation, and they have to fall back on their own judgement. Therefore, their own standards must harmonise with those of the Editor and must be as finely honed as his. One way of promoting this harmony is by the Editors making it a standard practice to discuss with the staff, the rights and wrongs of his own and their decisions in specific cases.

These considerations, important at all times, get all the more so at times of internal or international conflict, particularly in a country like India which is situated in a sensitive neighbourhood and is the arena of many conflicting interests, domestic and external, of competing ideas about the rights of society and the individual, and the rights relating to gender, class, caste, religion and community.

**The staff’s domain**

Particularly important in this respect is the role of the News Editor, Chief Sub Editor, (and their counterparts in electronic media), along with their colleagues on the Desk, a role which has unfortunately tended to fade, more so when the field staff is glorified by the personal byline in the print media and the face on the screen in the electronic media. But the importance of the role of the News Editor and Chief Sub Editor has only increased on account of these factors. All matter for publication/telecast passes through the hands of those who man the Desk. On the one hand, they are less exposed to the rush of events and pressures in the field, and contact with interested persuaders, and on the other, they have, or should have, time and resources to check data with
references. Therefore, unless their own judgement fails them, given the time they have for thought, they can better insure the publication/channel against errors. They are the safety net that catches mistakes which may slip through the hurried hands of the field staff.

1. Verify facts and weed out inaccuracies from field reports with the help of an adequate reference library which the publication/channel must maintain.

   Conjecture should not be allowed to masquerade as fact.

2. Segregate facts from direct or implied comments therein and put the facts in the space/time meant for facts. Confine comment to the space/time meant for comment, or identify it as comment even if it has to be accommodated alongside the facts.

3. Measure the right to publish against the relevant “public interest” before according supremacy to the former.

4. Weed out unsubstantiated allegations or innuendoes which are not essential to the story, or retain them only after measuring their defamatory potential.

5. Give fair opportunity to the aggrieved party to reply or contradict, within reasonable limits.

6. Where apology is called for, offer it readily, frankly, and with dignity.
7. Should proceedings for defamation follow, cover them fairly, and with due regard for law.

8. Avoid undue publicity to the personal affairs of personalities if public interest is not clearly at stake. But if it is, pursue the matter with diligence and without fear, but always with due regard to decency and good taste. Avoid harassing and intimidating sources.

9. Avoid exaggerating the story for the sake of heightening interest in it. Pushed beyond a point, exaggeration distorts facts. In the long run, objectivity sells better than sensationalism.

10. Allegations against actions of public servants in the performance of their duties should be doubly checked, because rules of service often deny them the right to reply, with official material to back them. But where exposure is well founded, it should be bold, but not boastful or premature.

11. Suppression of facts under pressure is dereliction of duty.

12. Statements and facts received on non-attributable basis should not be attributed.

13. But anonymity should not be allowed to become a cloak for the source to dish out falsehood or calumny, while the right to protect the source should be exercised to the full limit of the law. Journalists should caution one another against sources which mislead under the garb of anonymity.
14. Scenes of personal grief are a delicate matter to handle. They should never be shown blatantly in the name of “human interest.” Human rights are as important, and privacy of personal feelings counts among them.

15. The journalist’s right to information can be used as a powerful instrument for personal gain. It should never be.

16. In writing about religious controversies, all creeds and communities must be shown equal respect. All parties to such and other controversies deserve equally fair reporting.

17. In reporting crime, particularly crimes of sex, and more so crimes involving children, utmost care should be taken to see that the report itself does not become a punishment, which may blast a life without warrant. The alleged criminal and the victim and the witnesses must be identified with utmost care, with no implications of caste or religion. Only on the strongest grounds of public interest, should any of these considerations be diluted.

18. “Cheque-book journalism” and paying for information are equal to wages of sin. They should be resorted to only in extremes of “public interest” and when no other means of obtaining information are available. Even so, the payment must be disclosed in any relevant legal manner, and it should never be offered to those involved in a related legal matter. Do not mix financial journalism with playing the market.
19. Information should not be obtained through the use of clandestine listening and photographing devices or by intercepting private telephone conversation. Or through misrepresentation or subterfuge (popularly described as sting operations) except when justified only in public interest, and when information cannot be obtained by any other means.

20. Journalists must not accept favours for themselves or for any member of their families from persons and institutions whose activities they are reporting or commenting upon.

21. Journalists should not seek or accept such favours as out-of-turn allotment of accommodation, or land/apartments at subsidised rates, or similar privileges.

22. Where cases involving professional actions of journalists are filed at far-off places away from the professional location of the journalist concerned, the management should provide legal protection so that the threat of such harassment is not used merely to scare the media away from exposing unsavoury actions of powerful people. Otherwise such cases against journalists can become a form of punishment without proof of guilt.

Responsibility of the Editors Guild

The Guild would reinforce the guidelines by initiating suitable steps to improve the credibility and quality of publications and channels, whenever it receives instances from its
members of publication of misinformation, editorialised
coverage of news, malicious use of anonymity by sources,
inadequate correction or apology.

The Guild would encourage its members and others to bring
their complaints to the Guild, rather than taking them to
organisations which are less directly professional. The Guild
would develop a mechanism to encourage this process.
The supportive and corrective role of the Guild would
expand if more and more active editors join the Guild, and
also the Guild expands its activities to all regions of India.