



On Being A Professional Journalist

Professionals meet or exceed the
standards of their profession

By

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Taking Notes

Journalists take notes as they cover stories. Whether you work in broadcast, print, or online, those ‘notes’ are vital to your gathering information that you won’t forget or misquote. Reporters have video cameras and audio recorders to help them remember what they saw and heard, but taking notes is still important. I used to make notations in my reporter notebooks about where on a tape I could find a particular soundbite that might be important to my story. Doing that in the 1960’s and 70’s also helped me as I worked to confirm people’s statements, then write my story.

In addition to taking ‘story’ notes, I also wrote notes about ‘best practices’ in journalism and mass communications. Those notes sometimes came from something my news directors or a veteran anchor said in a meeting or to me personally. When I began attending journalism conferences I took notes from what the speakers thought were important to doing the job well. When I became a news director in 1980 I looked through those notes and realized I could use them

to help members of my news team — just the way my news directors had helped me.

I used those notes to help build ‘news manuals’ to print and give to new members of the team. I also used those notes to lead training sessions for team members. I believed (and still believe) that it’s important for members of your journalism and communications team to understand what it means to be a member of your team, and what it means to be ‘excellent’ in doing their job. I believe people, at least many of them, will respond positively to the objective of excellence when they understand the vision of their news manager.

Here’s an example from one of the manuals I wrote with other news managers in the 1980’s —

“The responsibility of television journalists is to gather and report information of importance and interest to the public accurately, honestly, and impartially. That is why we are here.

Our requirement is Excellence in All We Do. We want quality newscasts 24 hours a day. We get quality by Doing Right Things Right the First Time.

Never allow yourself to fall into the trap of accepting anything less than your personal best. Our station's Quality Advantage requires a commitment on everyone's part to continuous improvement. Each of us is responsible not only for fixing problems on the spot, but also preventing them from recurring. Even if all problems were eliminated, continuous improvement requires us to seek out opportunities for breakthroughs to meet our viewers' needs in new and innovative ways."

Exceeding the Standards

Setting ‘standards’ of excellence is a good thing to do for your team, but even better is for team members to ‘meet or exceed’ those standards. Here are some standards of broadcast journalism from a manual I put together with other news managers at a TV station decades ago —

- Professional journalists support freedom of speech and press for all people
- Professional journalists seek truth wherever it may be found
- Professional journalists are honest
- Professional journalists are accurate
- Professional journalists are fair and objective
- Professional journalists do not take sides in their stories or in public
- Professional journalists do not express personal opinions in their stores or in public
- Professional journalists are respectful of others
- Professional journalists conduct themselves with dignity
- Professional journalists obey laws

- Professional journalists make decisions based on the public good
- Professional journalists are not obligated to any interest other than that of the public
- Professional journalists leave determination of guilt or innocence to the courts
- Professional journalists do not promise anything they cannot deliver
- Professional journalists do nothing in their personal or professional lives that might conflict with their ability to gather and report news openly and honestly
- Professional journalists avoid all politically partisan activities
- Professional journalists clear outside employment with news management
- Professional journalists oppose any efforts to color, withhold, or prevent the presentation of news
- Professional journalists make constant efforts to open doors closed to the reporting of public proceedings
- Professional journalists are careful, thoughtful, and restrained while covering riots, civil disturbances, and terrorist/hostage stories

- Professional journalists do not engage in electronic eavesdropping
- Professional journalists edit copy and tape in context
- Professional journalists are cautious when using anonymous sources
- Professional journalists do not stage news stories
- Professional journalists cooperate with the editorial process of story and script approval
- Professional journalists seriously consider the audience before airing potentially offensive information or video
- Professional journalists get management approval before dealing with stories of a sensitive nature. This could include ethical and legal concerns, graphic content, and any other area that would be harmful to themselves, private individuals named in stories, this television station or its advertisers
- Professional journalists are cautious with any action that might interfere with the right of an individual to a fair trial
- Professional journalists arrive to work on time and put in a full day for their employer
- Professional journalists spend every available minute to find every available story

- Professional journalists tell those stories in the most personal, powerful, impactful, and compelling ways possible
- Professional journalists do right things right the first time
- Professional journalists conform to all requirements

Keep in mind that this list is from a news manual developed decades ago, so it does not address issues like the Internet, Social Media, or Artificial Intelligence. However, I think the basic principles in the list would address much of those areas today. Do you agree?

Next Time

One definition of journalism is, ‘the activity or profession of writing for newspapers, magazines, or news websites or preparing news to be broadcast’ (Oxford Languages). However, I’d like to add that writing for news or any other mass media is more than just putting ‘words on a page.’ I’ll address the art of ‘great writing’ in the next Real Journalism Newsletter. I hope you’ll join me.



1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee