

VPM News - Ethical Principles and Guidelines

VPM News provides trusted, factual local and regional journalism, covering topics that matter most to the communities we serve. To preserve that trust, we seek to operate within ethical guidelines that reinforce our guiding principles of excellence, transparency, objectivity, and independence.

Ethical guidelines abound in the world of journalism, yet no guidelines, regardless of their detail, can encompass the unique aspects of each ethical challenge. We look generally toward the ethical guidelines of our partner, National Public Radio (found at *npr.org*), as well as those of major journalistic organizations, such as the Society of Professional Journalists, when we are presented with ethical problems.

At VPM News, we think it is important for our content contributors and consumers of our broadcast and online content to understand key elements of our approach to the gathering and dissemination of information. As a news organization, VPM News strives to operate within the guidelines summarized below. These are ethical considerations that guide decision making; they are not legal standards, and this is not a comprehensive list. Every story has unique characteristics that call for the exercise of journalistic judgment.

Evaluating and Interacting with Sources

The quality of our work depends in significant part on the credibility and accuracy of the source material that informs it. We rely on a variety of sources: direct interviews; public records; local and federal government agencies; confirmation of information made available by private companies through regulatory filings or press releases; vetted online postings on websites or social media; and leads generated by other respected news organizations. In every case, regardless of the source, we are focused on confirming the provenance and quality of the information we receive.

Individuals, whether speaking for themselves or for the organizations they represent, are the most important sources of news, and we treat them with

candor and respect. Unless senior management has taken the unusual step of authorizing the use of undercover procedures for a particular investigation, VPM policy is for all reporters to always identify themselves to sources and to make it clear that they are engaged in newsgathering.

All interviews are presumed to be on the record. If a reporter perceives that a person being interviewed does not understand that he or she is on the record, the reporter must explain that all information provided, and the identity of the source, may be disclosed through broadcast or other publication.

Promises to maintain the identity of a source in confidence must be the exception, not the rule. VPM management may authorize a reporter to make such a promise, but no reporter is authorized to make that promise without management approval. Under approved circumstances, VPM will oppose subpoenas or other attempts to reveal the identity of a confidential source. However, in only the most unusual circumstances, would VPM refuse to comply with a court order to reveal a source. Thus, all sources receiving a promise of confidentiality must be informed of the limits of such a promise in advance of the interview.

Whenever we obtain information through the records of private or public sources, we will strive to verify that the records are authentic and that they originate from a *bona fide* source. We will take steps that are reasonable under the circumstances to verify the authenticity and completeness of all records used in our reporting. Citation of information in records must be accurate and in context to ensure that the meaning of the original record is presented fairly.

Online information sources present information of varying accuracy and quality. We seek to verify the credibility and accuracy of online information sources and not to accept them at face value or simply repeat or republish information. VPM's credibility is at stake when we quote or link to online materials, and we exclude information that may be the product of individuals or organizations that are attempting to spread rumors or misinformation.

The federal and Virginia freedom of information laws are important tools to obtain public records pertinent to our reporting. Virginia law also provides access to meetings of public bodies. When we attend the proceedings of a

public body, we are the eyes and ears of the citizens, and we have a duty to report such proceedings with accuracy and balance.

Freedom of information requests submitted by VPM to a public body or officer are to be made thoughtfully and articulated with specificity. We are deliberate and intentional about making requests under the freedom of information laws. Dialogue with public bodies in advance of requests for access to records or meetings should be the norm, as should efforts to negotiate the terms and conditions of responses to requests when a public body raises an objection. Where reasonable and lawful efforts to obtain information are rejected, VPM reserves its right to take steps to seek enforcement of the laws.

Good judgment must be used when capturing or identifying visual images of minors. Generic soundbites or visual images captured from a distance, for example at athletic events or concerts, rarely present significant privacy or safety issues. However, for any person not yet in high school or under age 16, our policy is to not connect names, images, and location information in a manner that would facilitate stalking or any threat of physical harm to a minor and to obtain parental approval for any use of the source's name or image.

Detecting and Avoiding Conflicts of Interest

Every organization engaged in journalism is comprised of individuals with a network of personal and social connections. On occasion, those connections collide with an assignment to report on a newsworthy matter. Such relationships might in some cases lead a neutral observer to question whether the affected VPM News employee can assess the credibility of a source or report information evenhandedly.

VPM News personnel are not to place themselves or VPM in a position where the neutrality or integrity of their reporting is questioned. VPM News uses two methods to address identified concerns about conflicts of interest. In some circumstances, conflicts may be adequately addressed through disclosure of the relationship by VPM News. In other circumstances, where

disclosure is inadequate, VPM News reserves the right to remove the employee from working on the story.

VPM News personnel are to identify promptly to a designated supervisor any relationship of a personal, familial, or financial nature with the story itself or with persons involved as possible information sources.

VPM News personnel must also use good judgment in recognizing biases that may affect their work. If a VPM employee has a personal experience that renders it difficult to remain objective about the subject matter of an assignment, including any experience involving physical or emotional trauma, the employee must discuss the matter with a designated supervisor. VPM will determine whether the situation simply requires additional editorial oversight or is serious enough to require assignment of the employee to other matters.

Personal conflicts of interest may also arise if an individual or entity offers money, favors, or other emoluments such as speaking engagements or free travel to a VPM News employee in exchange for coverage or favorable treatment. Whether the offer is direct or an unspoken invitation to a *quid pro quo*, all such offers must be rejected by VPM personnel. Any offer of a benefit to a VPM News employee under circumstances that suggest an effort to influence news coverage must be reported promptly to a designated supervisor.

VPM News is an organization supported by persons and entities that give donations or arrange for sponsorship of programming. All contributors and sponsors are to be treated without favor in newsgathering and reporting. VPM News views a "sponsor" as any persons or entity that provide VPM with underwriting funds or benefits of any kind or in any form, monetary or non-monetary.

All sponsors of VPM programming that are the subject of any news broadcast or article must be identified as such during the course of delivering the story. Contributors of gifts to VPM during the previous 12-month cycle that have a value in excess of \$10,000 should be identified in stories materially related to such contributors. Contributors of smaller amounts are disclosed at the discretion of VPM News where the information is material to the content of the story.

Any organization in any financial or journalistic relationship with VPM as a partner must be identified during the course of delivering content related to that organization. This includes any co-producer of content and any journalistic or media organization of which VPM is a member. If VPM News reports on a community or charitable event of which it is a co-sponsor, VPM's sponsorship of the event should be noted in any story covering the event.

Any member of any board of directors or advisory board of VPM who is either a source or the subject of a news story must be identified as such during the course of delivering the story. This protocol applies to all persons who have held such a position during the two years prior to publication of the story.

VPM News personnel may not serve on any government body, board, or commission. They are to avoid all overt political advocacy such as political contributions, participation in campaigns, display of political yard signs or bumper stickers, or social media posts. VPM has no political litmus test for employing any individual, and each employee is free to exercise his or her civil rights as a voter and citizen. However, VPM cannot be perceived to be an advocate for any political party, candidate, or issue.

Editing and Preparation of Content

VPM News' journalistic decisions reflect our best assessment of information that is highly relevant to our audience. Those decisions are driven by independent observation of the social and political scene in our region and of national and regional events that affect our audience. We seek to hear the diverse range of voices in our region, understand them, and present them for consideration and criticism.

VPM News seeks to present information without deference to the biases or agendas of our sources, to present the views of our sources in context, and to differentiate the presentation of factual reporting from commentary or opinion. We endeavor to provide a range of perspectives on important events and issues, with an eye toward balance. VPM News does not view balance as a presumption that all voices are equally credible, informed, and

truthful. We retain a healthy skepticism. Thus, we always retain editorial discretion to reject material from sources that spread obvious falsehoods, destructive or misleading messaging, or content that is in violation of legal or regulatory requirements.

When we use material previously published by another source, including a competing news organization, we attribute that information to the original source. When we quote or paraphrase material from another source, we do so sparingly and in a manner that would not devalue the original source or discourage our audience from examining the original source. We do not tolerate plagiarism.

Breaking news presents special problems that must often be addressed case by case. When information has been disseminated by another news organization but is of exceptionally high public interest, we may choose to use that information. However, we will attribute the information to its source, and we will state clearly whether we have been able to verify the information through independent means.

Maintenance of Newsgathering Records and Transparency

VPM strongly believes that journalists engaged in newsgathering are protected by First Amendment principles and by the Constitution and laws of Virginia. Unpublished materials and the working papers of our VPM News employees will not be provided to any person or entity voluntarily. Any subpoena or other legal process directed to VPM will be referred to our legal counsel for response.

VPM will firmly resist any effort to execute a search warrant on its newsroom or at the homes of its personnel. Such activity violates federal law in almost every circumstance.

VPM supports the rule of law. Thus, when it receives any subpoena or similar legal process, it will endeavor to hold and preserve any materials demanded until a judicial resolution of any objections or other dispute can be achieved. It is the policy of VPM to obey court orders that are issued

after proper notice and an opportunity to be heard, and only in the most unusual circumstance will it refuse to obey a court order.

VPM maintains records of its operations to the extent required by law. Individual employees do not necessarily keep records of all newsgathering work they have performed after a particular story has been completed.

Responding to Complaints and Criticisms

VPM News has a responsibility to the public to respond to fair criticism. Complaints may be submitted by electronic mail to editors@vpm.org. When complaints are received at VPM News, we have internal protocols that assign complaints to appropriate personnel for response. Unless a complaint appears frivolous or harassing, our goal is to respond to all complaints within 24-48 business hours of receipt. We believe that timely responses to complaints are respectful of our audience and build trust.

VPM News will correct material factual errors in published content if such errors are brought to our attention. Accuracy is an important goal, and we appreciate it when errors are pointed out to us. VPM News senior management reviews corrections and retractions before they are made. Where necessary, corrections or retractions may be reviewed by VPM's legal counsel.

We do not revisit and revise all content that is the subject of a complaint. In some cases, a viewer, listener, or website user simply disagrees with a news or editorial judgment, the accuracy of information received from a source we deem credible, or an opinion expressed in an interview. The decision to include or exclude material from a story, or to report or not report on an event, is simply a journalistic judgment of the kind made daily.

VPM is a licensed broadcaster with an FCC file and must comply with federal regulations governing broadcasters. A link and additional information relating to FCC matters is found at vpm.org.

VPM also complies with the takedown provisions of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. A link and additional information relating to DMCA takedown notices and demands is found at vpm.org.

