

A NEW ERA OF ETHICS FOR OUR JOURNALISM

AN INCREASED COMMITMENT TO THE TRANSPARENCY THAT HELPS BUILD TRUST WITH OUR READERS, WRITES KATHY ENGLISH



KATHY ENGLISH
Column

"I don't believe we should have a code of ethics if we can't live with it"

I wrote those words on April 8, 1984 in a memo to then Star deputy managing editor John Miller who was tasked with the important job of creating the Toronto Star's first written code of conduct for its journalists and who had reached out to the newsroom for our input.

As an idealistic young "cityside" general assignment reporter in that newsroom, I had strong views on the need for an ethics guide for journalists. In my long-winded memo, the print-out of which I have saved in

my files all these years, I told him: "I don't believe anyone can work in the newspaper business without confronting questions of ethics head-on."

"I think each of us has our own personal code of ethics and strive to live by it as we do our job... But, I still think it's important for the paper to lay down the standards it wants to uphold."

Some 24 years later - during which time I was away from the Star for 16 years teaching journalism and working in what we called "new media" in the late 1990s - here I am to tell you about the latest iteration of the Torstar Journalistic Standards Guide published last week on our website and on all Torstar news sites. And to tell you also, that everything that idealist young reporter be-

lieved all those years ago about the importance of journalistic standards holds true for me in today's 24/7 multi-platform newsrooms.

Most important, in this new era of misinformation and dwindling trust, when journalists must work harder than ever to earn the trust of our readers, I believe strongly in the accountability and transparency of having a well-thought out guide to journalism standards - and of making it easily accessible to readers. To that end, a link to the guide is now embedded on every piece of content on thestar.com. Links to the guide are also published on all other Torstar news sites.

As the standards guide makes clear, these policies apply to all Torstar editorial staff in the creation and publication of all editorial content on any platform. They also apply to all freelancers when creating content for Torstar news-

rooms.

The introduction to this guide makes clear its purpose:

"This 2018 version of the Torstar Journalistic Standards Guide provides a comprehensive code of journalistic principles and conduct to guide us in our mission: to responsibly engage and connect with our readers on all platforms with trusted news, information and content to help make their lives, their communities, our country and our world better."

But it also recognizes the fact that no journalism standards guide can anticipate all the possibilities journalists might face in the complex work of reporting, writing and presenting the news on many platforms. Believe me, journalism is far more complex now than when I was a 20-something reporter.

As the guide now states: "No code of conduct can cover every eventuality in

the 24-7 production of news and information on multiple platforms. Common sense, good judgment and the journalist's own moral compass must be brought to bear on any set of guidelines."

In line with this news organization's increased commitment to the transparency that helps build trust with our readers, the guide asks that we be able to explain the journalistic judgments we make:

"We should be prepared to explain publicly what we do in gathering and presenting news and information and the journalistic judgments involved in all we publish."

Such transparency is not always easy for journalists. But the demands of transparency and the increased need for greater media literacy make for a greater than ever imperative that journalists be able to explain what they do and how and why they do it. I have always believed we owe that to our audiences.

These Torstar journalistic standards, some of which date back to even be-

fore Miller first set them down in a Toronto Star ethics code in 1984, were reviewed and updated in past months by a committee that included me, Toronto Star editor Irene Gentle, StarMetro editor-in-chief Cathrin Bradbury, Hamilton Spectator editor-in-chief, Paul Berton and Torstar Community Brands director of content, Joanne Burghardt, with input from several reporters and editors across our Torstar newsrooms.

In updating this guide, we aimed to make it reflective of current digital realities while staying true to the principles that have long guided our journalism - most importantly - accuracy, fairness and independence from those we cover.

I expect you will hear much more specific standards in days to come. Meanwhile, I invite you to check them out for yourself.

Kathy English is the public editor of Torstar.

Read the Torstar Journalistic Standards Guide at theifp.ca.com

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