

Code of Conduct for Zimbabwean Media Practitioners

The purpose of this Code is to provide a set of common professional standards of conduct for media practitioners and media institutions in Zimbabwe.

Media practitioners and media institutions should abide by these standards and the public is entitled to expect that they will do so. There should be a remedy for those harmed by media conduct that violates these standards.

This Code will be applied and enforced by the Media Complaints Committee

1. Interpretation

In this Code:

“media institution” means any institution in Zimbabwe, whether in the public or private sector, that disseminates news to the public through the medium of a newspaper and/or other written and electronic publication or through electronic broadcasting.

“media practitioner” means a reporter or editor employed by a media institution or a freelance reporter or columnist who is a stringer or writes columns for a media institution.

2. Application

This Code will govern the conduct of media practitioners and media institutions that have agreed to be bound by this Code and to submit to the disciplinary jurisdiction of the Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe.

3. General standards

- a) Media practitioners must maintain the highest professional and ethical standards. They must carry out their functions of informing, educating and entertaining the public professionally and responsibly.
- b) Media practitioners must defend the principle of the freedom of the media to freely access, collect and disseminate information and to publish comments and criticisms. They must oppose censorship, suppression of news and the dissemination of propaganda.

4. Accuracy and fairness

- a) Media practitioners and media institutions must report and interpret the news with scrupulous honesty and must take all reasonable steps to ensure that they disseminate accurate information and that they depict events fairly and without distortions.

- (b) Media practitioners and media institutions must never publish information that they know to be false or maliciously make unfounded allegations about others that are intended to harm their reputations.
- (c) When compiling reports media practitioners must check their facts and the editors and publishers of newspapers and other media must take proper care not to publish inaccurate material. Before a media institution publishes a report, the reporter and the editor must ensure that all the steps that a reasonable, competent media practitioner would take to check its accuracy have in fact been taken.
- (d) Special care must be taken to check the accuracy of stories that may cause harm to individuals or organisations or to the public interest. Before publishing a story of alleged wrongdoing, all reasonable steps must be taken to ascertain the response of the alleged wrongdoer to the allegations. Any response from that person must be published together with the report setting out the allegations.
- (e) Media institutions must endeavour to provide full, fair and balanced reports of events and must not suppress essential information pertaining to those events. They must not distort information by exaggeration, by giving only one side of a story, by placing improper emphasis on one aspect of a story, by reporting the facts out of the context in which they occurred or by suppressing relevant available facts. They must avoid using misleading headlines or billboard postings.

5. Correction of inaccuracy or distortion

- (a) If a media institution discovers that it has published a report containing a significant inaccuracy or distortion of the facts, it must publish a correction promptly and with comparable prominence.
- (b) If a media institution discovers that it has published an erroneous report that has caused harm to the reputation of a person or institution reputation, it must publish an apology promptly and with due prominence.
- (c) A media institution must report fairly and accurately the outcome of an action for defamation against it.

6. Right of reply

Where a person or organisation believes that a media report contains inaccurate information or has unfairly criticised the person or organisation, the media institution concerned must give the person or organisation a fair opportunity to reply so as to enable that person or organisation to correct any inaccuracies and to respond to the criticism.

7. Comment

- a) A clear separation should be made between comment and opinion.
- b) A comment or expression of opinion must be a genuine and honest comment or expression of opinion relating to established fact.
- c) Comment or conjecture must not be presented in such a way as to create the impression that it is established fact.

8. Bribes and inducements

Media practitioners and media institutions must not publish or suppress a report or omit or alter vital facts in that report in return for payment of money or for any other gift or reward.

9. Pressure or influence

Media practitioners and media institutions must not suppress or distort information which the public has a right to know because of pressure or influence from their advertisers or others who have a corporate, political or advocacy interest in the media institution concerned.

10. Payment for information

Media practitioners and media institutions must not pay people to act as information sources unless there is demonstrable public interest value in the article.

11. Hatred or violence

- a) Media practitioners and media institutions must not publish material that is intended or is likely to engender hostility or hatred towards persons on the grounds of their race, ethnic origin, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, physical disability, religion or political affiliation.
- b) Media institutions must take utmost care to avoid contributing to the spread of ethnic hatred or political violence.

12. Reporting of elections

- a) Media practitioners and media institutions must report on elections in a fair and balanced manner.

- b) Before reporting a damaging allegation made against a candidate or a political party, a media practitioner should obtain, wherever possible, a comment from the candidate or party against whom the allegation has been made especially where the allegation has been made by an opposing candidate or an opposing political party.
- c) A media practitioner or media institution must not accept any gift, reward or inducement from a politician or candidate.
- d) As far as possible, a media practitioner or media institution should report the views of candidates and political parties directly and in their own words, rather than as they are described by others.
- e) A journalist must take care in reporting the findings of opinion polls. Any report should wherever possible include details about the methodology used in conducting the survey and by whom it was conducted.

13. Reporting of police investigations and criminal court cases

- a) In our law a person is presumed to be innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. The media must therefore refrain from publishing articles prejudging the outcome in criminal cases or seeking to influence the outcome of the cases.
- b) Media institutions are entitled to inform the public about the arrest of suspects by the police and the trial of persons accused of crimes. They should not, however, publish the names of suspects until the police have filed formal charges against them, unless it is in the public interest to do so before formal criminal charges are laid.
- c) Where a media institution has begun to report a criminal case, it must follow up and report subsequent developments in the case. For example, it is grossly unfair to report that a person has been charged with murder and then fail to report that the person was acquitted. The report of the subsequent developments must be given due prominence.

14. Privacy

- a) It is normally wrong for a media practitioner to intrude into and to report upon a person's private life without his or her consent.
- b) Reporting on a person's private life can only be justified when it is in the public interest to do so. This would include: detecting or exposing criminal conduct; detecting or exposing seriously anti-social conduct; protecting public health and safety; and preventing the public from being misled by some statement or action of that individual, such as where a person is doing something in private which he or she is publicly condemning.
- c) Media practitioners may probe and publish details about the private moral behaviour of a public official where this conduct has a bearing upon his or her suitability as a public official.

15. Intrusions into grief or shock

- a) In cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries should be carried out and approaches made with sympathy and tact.
- b) Media practitioners or photographers making enquiries at hospitals or similar institutions should normally identify themselves to a responsible official and obtain permission before entering non-public areas.

16. Interviewing or photographing children

- a) Media practitioners should not normally interview or photograph children under the age of sixteen in the absence of, or without the consent of, a parent or an adult who is responsible for the children.
- b) In interviewing and photographing children in difficult circumstances or with disabilities, special sensitivity and sympathy must be used.
- c) Children should not be approached or photographed while at school without the permission of the school authorities or institutions.

17. Children in criminal cases

Media institutions must not publish the names of any offender under sixteen arrested by the police or tried in the criminal courts.

18. Victims of crime

Media institutions must not identify victims of sexual assaults or publish material likely to contribute to such identification unless the victim has consented to such publication or the law authorises them to do so.

19. Innocent relatives and friends

Media institutions should generally avoid identifying relatives or friends of persons convicted or accused of crime unless the reference to them is necessary for the full, fair and accurate reporting of the crime or the legal proceedings.

20. Surreptitious gathering of information

- a) Media practitioners should normally use open methods of gathering information in which they clearly identify themselves as media practitioners.

Generally they should not obtain or seek to obtain information or pictures through surreptitious methods such as misrepresentation, deception, subterfuge or undercover techniques.

- b) Surreptitious methods of information gathering may only be used where open methods have failed to yield information in what is public interest. These methods may thus be employed where, for example, they will help to detect or expose criminal activity or will bring to light information that will protect the public against serious threats to public health or safety.

21. National security

- a) Media institutions must not prejudice the legitimate national security interests of Zimbabwe and place at risk members of the Defence Forces who are on active military duty.
- b) This provision does not prevent the media from exposing corruption in security or defence agencies or from commenting upon levels of expenditure on defence.

22. Plagiarism

A media practitioner must not engage in plagiarism. Plagiarism consists of making use of another person's words or ideas without permission and without proper acknowledgement and attribution of the source of those words or ideas.

23. Protection of sources

- a) Where a person has agreed to supply information only on condition that his or her identity remains confidential and the media practitioner agrees to this condition, the media practitioner must respect this undertaking and refuse to reveal the identity of the source.
- b) However, the media practitioner may tell the source that his or her identity might have to be revealed if it becomes clear in court that this information is needed to prevent or expose serious criminal conduct.