

The Varsity: Code of Journalistic Ethics

This is Part 1 of Varsity Publications' Operating Policy. This version was last edited on **January 31, 2015** and is effective as of **February 7, 2015**.

Preamble: The Varsity shall keep faith with its readers by presenting its news (which includes sports and features) and expressions of opinion (which include reviews and interpretations of the news) comprehensively, accurately, and fairly and by acknowledging error promptly.

— Varsity Publications' Governance Policy.

A. Scope

1. Scope of the Code of Journalistic Ethics

- (1) This code applies to anything published by *The Varsity*.
- (2) Anyone involved in creating, editing, or approving any content for *The Varsity* (referred to as journalists within this code) must follow this code in the course of doing so.
- (3) There may be circumstances in which the public interest overrides certain provisions of this code.
- (4) This code is intended to serve as the minimum standard for responsible and ethical behaviour for every Varsity journalist.
- (5) Nothing in this code limits other moral, ethical, or legal standards, constraints, or obligations, not mentioned herein, that journalists ought to adhere to.

B. Journalistic Ethics

2. Bias and honesty

- (1) Journalists must not plagiarize.
- (2) Journalists should recognize that their perspectives are determined by their background and positions within society, and are therefore necessarily biased.
- (3) Journalists should endeavor, despite their biases, to approach each assignment objectively.
- (4) Journalists must avoid significant conflicts of interest and situations where they are unable to approach their assignment objectively.
- (5) When a conflict of interest exists, may exist, or may be perceived to exist, a journalist must disclose this conflict to a supervisor or co-worker and develop a responsible course of action for avoiding and/or disclosing this conflict.
- (6) Membership in a ethnic, racial, gender, sexual, class, or otherwise identifiable social group shall never be construed as a conflict of interest, even when reporting on issues directly affecting the group in question.
- (7) Bias or prejudice against members of any group has no place in the practice of journalism.
- (8) Journalists will only accept free material or privilege on the explicit understanding that they are under no obligation to the individuals or groups involved.
- (9) Journalists may not promote the financial or other interest of subjects or their sponsors as a means of securing access to them or any other benefit.
- (10) Journalists should not report on individuals related by blood, marriage, or any close personal, romantic, or financial connection.

3. Fairness

- (1) Fairness is a balanced and impartial presentation of all the relevant facts in a news report, and of all substantial opinions in a matter of controversy.
- (2) Fairness demands that journalists place inaccurate or misleading public statements in factual perspective.
- (3) Fairness requires that in the reporting of news, journalists must respect the right of every person to a fair court trial or hearing and the presumption of innocence.
- (4) Journalists should identify themselves as such before conducting an interview, except when undertaking undercover reporting.
- (5) Journalists may not identify themselves as working for or representing the Varsity unless they are working on a specific assignment given to them by an editor.
- (6) Journalists should undertake undercover reporting only when there is a public interest reason to do so and when the information cannot be obtained by any other means. Undercover reporting must be approved in advance by the most senior editor available.
- (7) Editors should contact the subjects of undercover reporting and allow them the opportunity to comment on any quotations or statements about them that will appear in published content.
- (8) Journalists should honestly state the level of substantiation they have been able to achieve and, when relevant, state the manner in which quotations or information was gathered. (E.g.: "A single source told the Varsity..." OR "Smith told an undercover reporter that...")
- (9) Journalists must be forthright in communicating the normal practice of journalism surrounding "on the record" and "off the record" statements with sources and subjects, bearing in mind that some individuals may have little or no experience dealing with journalists.
- (10) Journalists must not offer or promise anyone approval over published content. In certain circumstances, journalists may allow individuals to see content or quotations before publication, but will never be obliged to make changes to such content.
- (11) *The Varsity* must maintain opinion and letters sections, and shall strive to maintain an open dialogue with readers by publishing diverse opinions about its coverage.
- (12) Persons or groups who have been the subject of negative commentary in opinion articles, or who have been the subject of reporting that might reasonably be perceived as negative, should be allowed a reasonable right of reply in the print and online publications.

4. Accuracy

- (1) Journalists must not publish inaccuracies, such as: by distorting meaning by over- or under-emphasis, by placing facts or quotations out of context, or by headlines not warranted by the text.
- (2) Journalists must not report conjecture or unsubstantiated opinions as fact.
- (3) In particular, journalists should exercise especially cautious scepticism with regard to information provided by sources with an obvious bias or interest.

- (4) Journalists should seek out all relevant points of view. They should give due consideration to all viewpoints, and allow every relevant party to represent themselves accurately.
- (5) Journalists should not use unattributed quotations or information unless it is necessary to protect a source or if that information could not be obtained without the assurance of anonymity.
- (6) Journalists must protect the anonymity of sources to whom they have given such assurances.
- (7) All information should be confirmed and corroborated by more than one source, unless there is an urgent public interest in publishing information from a single source.
- (8) Photos must not be altered in a way that alters the meaning or information that they convey.
- (9) Illustrations need not be strictly accurate, but artistic licence should not be used as an excuse to misrepresent an issue or make false information credible.
- (10) Infographics shall only present accurate information and shall not be used to distort information or present it out of proper context.
- (11) Except under exceptional circumstances, all content shall be accompanied by an accurate credit or by-line.
- (12) Under any circumstances where pseudonyms are used, they must be identified as such.

5. Privacy and legal responsibility

- (1) Journalists should ordinarily respect individuals right to privacy when they have a reasonable expectation of privacy.
- (2) Journalists should only invade individual privacy when there is a strong public interest reason to do so. The decision to do so shall be made by the most senior editor available.
- (3) Journalists should be cautious about the publication of information that may enable or assist individuals, police, government agencies, or others to harass or persecute an individual or group, even if such information is not damaging in and of itself. Such cases should be judged in the same manner as privacy issues.
- (4) Journalists should consider the permanent effect that damaging information may have on an individual's life.
- (5) *The Varsity* will refrain from in any way identifying the victims or alleged perpetrators of crimes that carry a social stigma without their express permission, except when there is a public interest in identifying the alleged perpetrator(s).
- (6) Journalists must give individuals or groups the opportunity to reply to information or allegations that might reasonably be damaging to that individual or group's interests or reputation.
- (7) Journalists should be familiar with and abide by the laws of defamation, copyright, and contempt of court in the jurisdictions within which they work.

6. Personal behaviour

- (1) *The Varsity* recognizes journalists' right to a private life and to engage in their community separately from their journalistic role. *The Varsity* further recognizes that this is especially so for occasional volunteer journalists.

- (2) Notwithstanding (1), journalists must not engage in any behaviour that will compromise the real or perceived ability to objectively and properly fulfil their role as a journalist, or which is likely to damage the reputation of *The Varsity*.
- (3) Journalists must inform their editor if, in their capacity as a Varsity journalist, they intend to:
 - a) Give evidence in court
 - b) Give evidence to any official body in connection with material published by *The Varsity*.
- (4) Journalists must inform their editor and receive permission if, in their capacity as a Varsity journalist, they intend to:
 - a) Participate in any public event
 - b) Appear in any other media
 - c) Contribute to another newspaper, magazine, or other media organization
 - d) Publicly express an opinion on any issue they have covered, are covering, or may cover in their capacity as a journalist.

7. Other ethical standards

- (1) Journalists should consistently respect the dignity, privacy, freedoms, and well-being of the people encountered in the course of journalistic activities.
- (2) Journalists should only include information in the content that create that is relevant to the story.
- (3) In particular, journalists should not publish information about a subject's race, colour, sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, political or religious affiliations, place of origin, class, or gender unless it is relevant to the story.
- (4) Journalists should exercise particular care in reporting on suicide or issues involving suicide, bearing in mind the risk of encouraging others.
- (5) Publishing material intended to promote hatred or violence against any group or person is unethical, unless it is for the purpose of reporting on an incident of relevance the community. In the latter case, journalists should be cautious about whether they are unintentionally giving a forum to hateful material without adequately countering its effects.
- (6) *The Varsity* will not pay for the exclusive rights to any news story.
- (7) *The Varsity* will clearly delineate between news, commentary from an individual or groups, and commentary by the paper itself in the form of unsigned editorials.

C. Public interest

8. Definition of public interest for the purposes of this code

- (1) Public interest includes, but is not confined to:
 - a) Detecting or exposing crimes or serious impropriety.
 - b) Protecting public health and safety.
 - c) Preventing the public from being misled by an action or statement of an individual or organization.
- (2) There is a public interest in freedom of speech itself.
- (3) There is a public interest in providing information that allows:

- a) Voters or constituents to hold elected office holders to account for their performance in that office.
- b) Voters to make more informed decisions in that capacity.
- c) Those who pay fees to any organization to hold that organization to account for its use of those fees.

D. Recourse and remedies

9. Public availability of this code

- (1) This code shall be publicly available on *The Varsity's* website and the means of accessing this code shall be printed in every publication of *The Varsity*.

10. Making a complaint about a violation of this code or other ethical infraction

- (1) Any person or organization directly affected by:
 - a) a violation of this code,
 - b) another ethical infraction,
 - c) or another failure to practice responsible journalismby a Varsity journalist or in a publication of *The Varsity* may complain to *The Varsity* about that violation.
- (2) Complaints may only be made by those directly affected or by an authorized representative of a group directly affected. Complaints may not be brought by third parties.
- (3) Complaints should be made:
 - a) First to the editor directly responsible for the journalist or content in question.
 - b) Second to the Editor-in-Chief.
 - c) Third to the Varsity's Board of Directors,
- (4) The means of contacting those named above shall be made available in all print publications and on *The Varsity's* website.
- (5) Nothing in this code limits the right of members of the Varsity to complain directly to directors or to the Board of Directors.
- (6) Complaints should specify the content or journalist in question and contain specific details as to the alleged violation.
- (7) The recipient of the complaint will promptly acknowledge receipt thereof and inform the complainant that their complaint is being investigated and that they will be notified of the result of the investigation and of any action taken.

11. Remedies

- (1) On receipt of a complaint, *The Varsity* will investigate to determine whether the violation complained of occurred and will take appropriate action to remedy any wrongdoing.
- (2) *The Varsity* will notify the complainant of the results of such investigation and of any action taken.
- (3) Remedies include:
 - a) Clarifications: which clarify information that while accurate was not clearly expressed.

- b) Corrections: which correct inaccurate information.
 - c) Retractions: which withdraw an article or other content from publication.
 - d) Apologies.
- (4) Remedies will be implemented as follows:
- a) The online version of the content in question will be altered to reflect the remedy and a prominent note will be added to indicate that the content has been altered to reflect a certain remedy. (E.g.: An article which contained an inaccurate fact should be edited to remove that fact or substitute and accurate one, and a note added to state “This article has been edited to reflect the following correction...”) Notes may be issued as a “Correction,” “Clarification,” or “Editor’s Note” at the discretion of the Editor-in-Chief.
 - b) Appropriate text to reflect the remedy will be published in the next print publication. A place shall be set aside in the print publication where remedies are ordinarily published.
 - c) Apologies may be issued directly to the person(s) or group(s) affected, or may be published.

12. Further action

- (1) Recognizing that one of the purposes of the Varsity, as defined by its membership, is to allow its members the opportunity to learn the practice of responsible journalism, the Varsity will endeavour to take constructive rather than punitive action following a violation.
- (2) Constructive further action will include:
 - a) Informing the journalists involved of the violation
 - b) Explaining why the act in question was unethical or constituted a failure to practice responsible journalism
 - c) Discussing strategies to avoid similar violations in the future, both with the journalist in question and, if appropriate, with other journalists doing similar work.
- (3) Punitive further action will be taken only when the journalist in question ought reasonably to have known that the act or behaviour in question was a violation, or when the journalist acted maliciously or in bad faith.
- (4) Punitive action will be appropriate given the severity of the violation, and the intent.
- (5) Punitive action may include:
 - a) Probation
 - b) Suspension
 - c) Temporary or permanent removal of privileges
 - d) For occasional volunteers, a permanent ban from working for the *The Varsity*.
 - e) For employees or elected office-holders, removal from office and termination of any agreement or contract with the Varsity.

13. Archives

(1) Recognizing that *The Varsity* acts as U of T's paper of record and that access to the archives of the publication is a public good for the community, the Varsity will not remove or modify content on *The Varsity's* website except in the following circumstances:

- a) When it is shown that the content is no longer accurate.
- b) When the public availability of the content might reasonably endanger the safety of any individual or group.
- c) When other strong public interest arguments can be shown for doing so.