

AFP editorial standards and best practices

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AFP EDITORIAL STANDARDS AND BEST PRACTICES

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Introduction

The following document on editorial standards and best practices sets out the guiding principles for AFP's editorial operations at a time of fast-moving changes in the news media.

It incorporates the universally accepted ethical principles of providing accurate, impartial and balanced coverage, and codifies and elaborates on the ethical guidelines listed in our editorial stylebooks.

It is a living document that will be updated as the news business develops and we encounter fresh challenges.

The guidelines and rules in this document are not designed to be a substitute for, or to take precedence over, local labour legislation or existing company agreements.

It is divided into nine sections - the 10 key principles, the fundamentals, areas of concern, conduct, financial reporting, security and hostile environments, UGC, artificial intelligence and images.

This document was drawn up after extensive research into the ethics codes of other major media around the world, historical documents such as the 1971 Munich Declaration of the Duties and Rights of Journalists, and contemporary research and guidelines published by such institutions as the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University in New York.

Thanks above all are due to the members of the AFP editorial team who contributed to the drafting of this document.

Eric Wishart, Michèle Léridon

1/ Ten guiding principles

- 1) AFP journalists are expected to provide accurate, balanced and impartial news coverage, and to correct errors quickly and transparently.
- 2) AFP journalists must speak with an independent voice, free of prejudice, bias or external influence. They cannot be obliged to carry out a task that violates the Agency's code of editorial standards and best practices.
- 3) AFP journalists must protect the confidentiality of sources and must never knowingly put them in harm's way.
- 4) AFP journalists must respect the presumption of innocence.
- 5) AFP journalists have a duty to seek the truth and not passively report information as it is presented to them. They should challenge their sources and question the facts.
- 6) AFP photo and TV journalists must not doctor images or videos and must not tamper with or alter subject matter. Text journalists must not manipulate quotes.
- 7) AFP journalists must identify their sources of information transparently and do not plagiarise. They must never submit a story to a source for vetting.
- 8) AFP journalists must exercise sensitivity when approaching victims or their relatives and avoid intruding on private grief. They must take particular care when interviewing or taking images of children, and whenever possible obtain parental consent.
- 9) AFP journalists must identify themselves as such. They must not use subterfuge other than in exceptional circumstances with the approval of the news management.
- 10) AFP journalists do not use information they have gathered for their personal benefit or use their position for financial gain. They do not pay sources.

2/ The Fundamentals

ACCURACY AND TRUTH

As AFP journalists, we must report the facts accurately in a proper context without selective use of material or deliberate omissions. We must separate fact from opinion and not report rumours as fact. We must maintain the highest standards of verification.

The headline and the lead paragraph must be supported by the story and we must ensure that background information is correct.

Every story must be correctly, precisely and transparently sourced. We should only use anonymous sources if we have no alternative or for security reasons and the story is sufficiently important to justify it.

Datelines must be honest, and bylined writers must be where they say they are. Photos and videos must not be staged, manipulated or edited to give a misleading or false picture of events. Graphics must be scaled correctly to avoid giving a distorted comparison of data. Information used in graphics must come from trustworthy sources and be thoroughly checked.

We must not be influenced by the hype or publicity surrounding an event and should never exaggerate. We treat superlative claims such as first, biggest, best and worst with the scepticism they deserve.

We have a duty to seek the truth and not passively report information as it is presented to us. We must challenge our sources. We can accurately quote a politician, but is he or she giving correct facts or telling the truth? Where did the aid worker learn the casualty toll? Are the numbers cited in a speech correct?

We have a duty to report the news but should draw attention to any inconsistencies and inaccuracies in a newsmaker's comments.

In other words, we must do everything we can to provide as clear and truthful coverage of events as possible. With the amount of rumour and noise circulating online and on social networks, our role of providing accurate and verified news, via identified and reliable sources, has never been more important.

BALANCE AND FAIRNESS

Our coverage must be fair, impartial and balanced. We must try to contact all sides of a story and obtain comment and reaction from those facing criticism or accusations of wrongdoing. Unless we are dealing with breaking news, we should give a person reasonable time to respond. A single unanswered phone call or email is insufficient. If we cannot reach the person in time, we should say so in the story and keep trying to elicit comment, updating the story if we obtain one.

Producing balanced coverage does not oblige us to give equal space to all sides of an issue. We do not have to repeat hate speech, defamatory comments and incitements to violence or propaganda. Nor are we required to quote views that contradict established facts when giving background information.

We should regularly step back and ask ourselves if our coverage really is balanced and complete, particularly when it comes to sensitive topics such as conflicts or elections.

COMPLAINTS AND THE RIGHT OF REPLY

When complaints are made about our coverage we should deal with them politely, calmly and promptly, including when we feel the complaint is unjustified. When a complaint is justified we can correct a factual error or offer to quote the aggrieved party in a fresh story -- which does not preclude us from returning to the original source of the story for further comment.

In the case of complaints that touch on potential legal issues, such as libel or breach of law, we should (a) ask the person to submit the complaint in writing and (b) refer the matter to the management for handling by AFP's legal department.

We must not enter into correspondence with the person concerned beyond acknowledging receipt of their complaint and saying that it has been transferred to the relevant department. Anything we write or say, however well intentioned, can be used in future legal action against the Agency.

CORRECTIONS AND KILLS

AFP must correct errors quickly and transparently. The Agency does not set a time limit on corrections - even if days or weeks have passed, factual errors must be corrected and if necessary, the story killed and removed from the database. When in doubt, the journalist should contact the chief editor and legal department for advice.

DATELINES AND BYLINES

Datelines can only be used if AFP has a journalist, either a staffer or a stringer, at the scene. We must be transparent with datelines and not pretend to be somewhere we are not. Journalists being sent on coverage should not write advancers for sports, conferences or any other events with the local dateline if they have not yet arrived.

We should not use a dateline if we are receiving our information from a local news agency and there is no AFP presence at the scene, even if we have an agreement to pick up the local agency's coverage. We can switch a series to a local dateline once we have an AFP presence (text, photo, video) and have received initial elements from the location. A byline can be used if the journalist is at, or has just returned from, the datelined location, but not before.

When the situation merits it, a second byline can be added from another location

(e.g. by Tom BROWN (with John SMITH in Paris)

Vienna, July 10 xxx

DATAJOURNALISM

AFP journalists mining data must ensure that the material is accurate and originates from a trustworthy source. They must present the resulting content in a neutral fashion. They must not present the data in a way that favours any particular narrative or indicates bias. Graphics giving data should be properly scaled to avoid giving misleading impressions.

EMBARGOES

Once we agree to handle a story with an embargo we are ethically obliged to respect it. However, that obligation ends the moment another news outlet breaks the embargo, or if they publish elements under an "exclusive" tag with the tacit approval of the embargoed material's authors.

If a reporter believes there is a pressing reason for releasing the story ahead of time he or she should consult with the bureau chief or head of service.

Breaking an embargo can deprive us of receiving future information from those concerned, so it should be done only with the approval of the chief editor.

HANDOUTS

We must clearly identify all material received as handouts from governments, press services etc. and never present it as our original work. The same rule applies to pool reports.

IDENTIFYING YOURSELF AS A JOURNALIST

AFP journalists must identify themselves as such. They must not conceal or misrepresent their identities without an overriding reason such as personal safety, in which case the news management should be informed.

INTERVIEWS

We must explain the circumstances under which we conducted an interview and say if there were any ground rules (which would require prior approval from the bureau chief, head of service or chief editor). If it was a face-to-face interview, we should make that clear by giving the location and any colour elements that add to the story.

If the interview was conducted electronically, we must say so, e.g. – XXX said in the interview, which was conducted by telephone/Skype call/ email/Facebook messenger etc.

This must be made clear from the very start of the series so that there is no danger of misleading clients and consumers who may assume the interview was face-to-face. We must also say whether we submitted the questions in advance.

We never submit the text of an interview or quotes for vetting although we can recontact the individual for clarification of any factual points or unclear quotes.

PLAGIARISM

We must never present the work of others as our own. If we use external material such as extracts from the work of others, pick-ups from interviews and other media, the source must be fully identified and credited. We must not violate copyright.

PRESUMPTION OF INNOCENCE

We must respect the presumption of innocence and never suggest that because an individual has been arrested or charged that he or she is guilty.

PRODUCT LAUNCHES

Major technology or other product launches can generate global interest and should be given the coverage they merit, but we must maintain a neutral tone and not appear to be giving an endorsement. We must avoid repeating manufacturers' claims of first, biggest and best, unless we can independently verify the veracity of the assertion, and we should add background on competing products.

PROTECTION OF SOURCES

Journalists have a duty to protect the identity of confidential sources and fixers and should never knowingly put them at risk. Digital surveillance is now commonplace and this should be taken into account when working on sensitive stories. If we promise our sources confidentiality, we must be prepared to accept any legal consequences that may result.

AFP journalists should never hand over their recordings, notes or images to a third party. If requested to do so they should inform the chief editor who will seek legal advice if necessary.

RESPECT FOR THE LAW

AFP journalists respect the laws of the countries where they work and must not resort to illegal means such as theft, misrepresentation, stealing of passwords, hacking or electronic surveillance to obtain information. We can report on material whose origin is legally questionable such as leaked classified documents, but we must take care to ensure that we are not leaving ourselves open to potential legal action. In such cases, the reporter should contact the chief editor who will consult with the legal department if necessary.

SOURCES AND ATTRIBUTION

We have a duty to be as transparent as possible in our reporting so anonymous sources should only be used to report information that we cannot obtain by other means. The use of anonymous sources should be an exception, not the rule, and we must explain in as much detail as possible why we cannot identify the source.

Before granting anonymity, we must consider the motivations of the source and be wary of possible manipulation.

See more on :

https://www.afp.com/sites/default/files/20_principles_of_sourcing_march_2018.pdf

SUBTERFUGE

We should never film or record people with hidden equipment unless there is an overriding public interest or if we have security or other legitimate reasons. It is forbidden to film or record someone without their knowledge when the story concerns their private life or is in a private location.

USE OF QUOTES

We must report sources accurately, without modifying what was said or selectively using quotes that misrepresent the sense of the statement.

It is not our responsibility to correct grammatical mistakes or clumsy language. We can use a partial quote or paraphrase if necessary, although it is legitimate to quote verbatim a public figure who misspoke.

We must never change the sense of a quote through editing, either in text or video, and avoid using ellipses. Without overburdening the text, we should give complete quotes and limit partial quotes. If there is any room for doubt, we must explain where and how we obtained the quote.

3/ Areas of Concern

ANALYSES

Providing analyses of current issues is an important part of our job, but we must take care that analyses are based on the opinions of those interviewed and do not reflect our own viewpoint.

We are a global news agency and we should seek out analysts who offer conflicting points of view, and not be content with analysts who represent only one position. We must speak to as broad a range of named experts as possible and then write the story.

We must not decide the angle and then find analysts who will provide quotes to fit our narrative.

CHILDREN

We must exercise caution and understanding when interviewing or photographing children, who are vulnerable and unprepared to deal with the media. We should seek permission, preferably in writing, from a parent, guardian, teacher or other responsible individual before speaking to, photographing or filming children.

This can be impractical when covering wars, disasters or other breaking news, in which case we should make a judgment based on the news value of the story. It is important to know the local legal definition of adulthood as well as the law concerning media coverage of minors, including as victims, perpetrators or witnesses of crime. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma has published useful guidelines on interviewing children in difficult situations.

<http://dartcenter.org/content/covering-children-trauma?section=all>

DEATH

We must take special care when reporting deaths. We must ensure that the death has been confirmed by the family, officials with direct knowledge of the situation or an authorised individual such as a literary agent or company spokesperson. We must ensure that we know how the source has knowledge of the death so they are not just repeating hearsay, other media reports or social media chatter.

We can pick up the death of a major public figure if it is reported by a trustworthy media with an identified source that meets AFP's standards of verification (the BBC quoting Buckingham Palace on the death of the Queen). In all other circumstances we must seek independent confirmation.

The false, or precipitous, reporting of a death can cause unnecessary grief and distress, is extremely damaging to AFP's reputation and should be prevented at all costs.

ELECTIONS

Media coverage of elections is a fundamental element in the democratic process, and AFP journalists have a responsibility to provide impartial coverage and to give a voice to all candidates and political parties. Reporters should not allow their political opinions to influence their work. Journalists should maintain a professional distance from the candidates whom they are covering and should not develop friendships. They should not accept any form of gift, favour or service from a candidate or the candidate's campaign staff. If we travel with a political campaign we must pay our own way and not accept hospitality. Candidates must understand that we cover campaign events on merit and our presence does not guarantee coverage.

Statements from candidates quoting facts and figures or regarding their opponents' records or policy positions should be scrupulously checked for errors, distortions or lies. We can quote what the candidate says but we must also publish the correct version of the facts where there is a contradiction.

We must be careful when candidates employ personal insults, spread rumours or make sexist, racist or other derogatory or potentially defamatory comments about their opponents. These can be reported, depending on the circumstances, but should be put in context and their opponents should be given the right of reply. If in doubt the report should consult the chief editor.

Coverage of opinion polls should be restricted to those carried out by respected polling institutes. Our stories should always contain a paragraph giving the date and conditions of the poll, the number of people interviewed and the method used. Polls published by political campaigns should be treated with scepticism.

We must understand the legal framework of the election and any rules concerning coverage such as publishing the results of opinion polls or candidates' statements beyond a certain deadline before voting begins. We can report the election result based on exit polls if it is predicted by a respected media organisation that has allocated significant resources to monitoring the election, but we must not 'call' the election based on too small or unrepresentative a sample of polling stations.

Election laws usually forbid the publishing of exit polls before voting closes, but as with any embargo, and with the approval of the chief editor, we are free to publish once it is broken.

GRIEF/MINIMISING HARM

We should exercise sensitivity and compassion when interviewing people caught up in traumatic events. Dealing with the media can be a source of additional distress for many individuals and we must take that into account. We should avoid intruding into private grief unless the people indicate a willingness to talk.

MASS SHOOTINGS

We should identify the perpetrators of mass shootings and murders but should be careful not to give them a platform by publishing anything more than limited extracts from their treatises or online posts. Should they come to trial, anything said in open court can be reported on merit.

MEDICAL BREAKTHROUGHS

We must exercise caution in the reporting of “medical breakthroughs” announced by researchers and pharmaceutical companies, which can raise false hopes and rarely have an immediate impact on the disease or condition concerned. Unless there is an exceptional time factor, such reports should be submitted to the editor-in-chief’s department and the specialist medical reporting team in Paris for verification. The same goes for announcements of scientific breakthroughs in other fields.

RACE/RELIGION/SEXUAL ORIENTATION

We do not specify an individual’s race, religion or sexual orientation unless it is relevant to the story. However, we can give an individual’s nationality, age and profession. We can describe a person’s appearance as part of the story, but avoid stereotypical descriptions such as “fat”, “pretty” or “sexy”.

We refer to sexual orientation, not preference. A person who changes sex is transgender and should be referred to by their new sexual identity. If an individual announces he or she is gay, use a neutral term and avoid loaded words like “admitted”.

PROFANITIES/HATE SPEECH/INCITEMENT TO VIOLENCE

We avoid repeating offensive language such as profanities, racial slurs, hate speech or incitements to violence unless there is a compelling editorial reason to do so (such as a politician speaking in a public forum) in which case we must put it in context and solicit reactions. Reports or recordings containing such language should be submitted to the chief editor’s department for approval. If we do run such content we must flag the story accordingly to warn our clients and readers.

REPORTING LIBELLOUS STATEMENTS

Being an international news agency does not protect us from the threat of being sued for defamation, so we should exercise great caution when reporting, or repeating, potentially libellous statements that damage an individual’s reputation. We should familiarize ourselves with the local laws concerning defamation, including journalistic privilege, which can allow us to quote potentially libellous statements spoken in open court or in parliament. A detailed section on libel is contained in the AFP stylebook.

SUICIDE

We must avoid giving suicide as a likely cause of death unless it has been officially confirmed or there is overwhelming evidence, and avoid giving excessive detail about what method was used.

4/ Conduct

AFP EMAIL

AFP journalists should avoid using their AFP email account for personal correspondence and instead use a personal email account. At the same time, AFP journalists should use the AFP email for all their internal and external professional correspondence, unless doing so could potentially compromise a confidential source.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

AFP journalists must declare to their department head conflicts of interest that may influence or appear to influence their work and if necessary excuse themselves from the related coverage.

COVERING AFP

One of the trickiest challenges for a news outlet is often its own in-house coverage, and AFP is no exception. When covering AFP we must maintain the same rules of balance and impartiality that we do in the rest of our reporting and should quote contrasting views if necessary. We should not use anonymous sources in stories about AFP.

If we are covering a new AFP product launch or the winning of an award we should do it factually without resorting to blatant self-promotion. As is the case with all news media, it is perfectly acceptable to give prominence to our own winners if we are covering a list of awards.

All stories related to AFP should be submitted to the editor-in-chief's department for approval.

When we refer to individuals who are members of the AFP board or the board of governors, including staff representatives, in stories we must their point out their membership of these bodies. Likewise, if we quote or refer to AFP staff members in stories we must indicate that they work for the Agency.

The same rules of impartiality and balance apply when covering our competitors and other media.

FREELANCE WORK

AFP journalists wishing to engage in freelance work must request authorisation from the management. Unless there are exceptional circumstances, the management must reply to any request within 10 days and provide an explanation if the response is negative.

Freelance work must not affect their availability to work for AFP, conflict with the ethical standards of AFP and or risk damaging the Agency's reputation. AFP journalists must not work for a competitor.

GIFTS AND HOSPITALITY

AFP journalists should not accept hospitality, gifts, travel, accommodation, tickets, entertainment or other benefits from their sources with the exception of items of nominal value. If it is unavoidable to do so in the pursuit of a story – an invitation to take a corporate jet to visit a remote factory – the chief editor should be consulted on how to proceed (such as paying a contribution towards the costs). We never accept cash or any form of token or coupon with a monetary value. Any high value objects received as gifts should be declined with a polite explanation that accepting them would contravene AFP company policy.

Occasional drinks, lunches or dinners with contacts are part and parcel of journalism, but we should invite rather than be invited. Contacts should never receive preferential treatment as a result of their hospitality, nor be led to expect it.

AFP journalists should never receive gifts or promotional material from contacts such as press services at their home address (except for freelancers who work from home).

Any materials such as technology items or cars loaned for test purposes should be returned within 72 hours. Long term, or indefinite, loans are prohibited. Review items, like books, compact discs or video games, may be kept but not sold.

AFP journalists involved in coverage or on other related official duty may accept complimentary tickets or media passes to events.

We do not pay sources for information, but depending on local customs and on special occasions we can give gifts to sources such as AFP souvenirs. We should keep them to items of a nominal value and never give cash.

EVENT PARTNERSHIPS / SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

AFP can act as a “media partner” for major conferences and events that are relevant to our areas of activity (journalism, tech etc.) This type of partnership can help raise awareness of our brand in key sectors and is a common practice within the industry.

There must be a written understanding in the partnership agreement that AFP’s coverage of the event will be separate from, and independent of, the Agency’s role as a media partner. Coverage of the event, including how it is presented on our commercial platforms, should be done purely on merit.

The Agency should gain no financial advantage from the partnership, such as free transport to the event or free accommodation for its journalists, that could raise doubts about our independence or raise expectations of privileged coverage from the organisers. Receiving a discounted rate for transport or accommodation as a partner is acceptable, as long it is within reasonable limits. As is the accepted practice in the industry, AFP journalists covering the event can partake of courtesy snacks and attend working lunches and dinners organized by the organisers or conference participants.

The contracts must specify how the AFP brand and logo will be used by the partner, i.e. in programmes, publicity for the event, posters etc. The object of the exercise is to promote the AFP name, but we must ensure that we retain control of how the agency's name is represented.

Bureaus and regions should contact the global news management for initial approval when they are considering entering such partnerships, and then submit the terms and conditions before signing any final agreement.

When it comes to speaking engagements, AFP journalists are in demand and their participation in conferences and other public events raises the agency's profile and provides a platform to show our expertise on current issues. In this case, we can accept complimentary transport, meals and accommodation if there is no potential conflict of interest in coverage. There is a financial cost for the agency in releasing a journalist from their normal work to attend such an event, so it is acceptable that the organisers bear the cost of our presence.

EXTERNAL ACTIVITIES

AFP understands that its staff members will engage in such external activities as community affairs, politics, support for social or other causes, independent writing including books and online projects. While the Agency respects staff members' freedom to do so, there must be a clear separation between what is done in a personal capacity and in a professional capacity. It is reasonable to identify ourselves as working for AFP, but the Agency's name should not be used for promotion or in campaigning, and the Agency should be informed. We must do nothing that might cast doubt on our ability to provide unbiased coverage or that impinges on the Agency's reputation for impartiality.

Nothing in this is intended to restrict AFP journalists from engaging in these activities; the aim is to ensure that outside interests do not come into conflict with AFP's interests or reputation.

ENDORSEMENTS

AFP journalists are forbidden to endorse commercial products.

FAMILY/PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

AFP journalists should not quote, photograph, video or cover in any other way members of their own family or people with whom they have a close personal relationship. If such a conflict arises the journalist should inform their bureau chief, service head or editor and hand the coverage over to a colleague.

MEDIA INTERVIEWS/PUBLIC SPEAKING

AFP journalists who agree to be interviewed by other news media must respect the Agency's rules for impartiality and fairness. They should only accept interview requests from respected news outlets and avoid situations where they are interviewed by polemicists, or where their words could be used for propaganda purposes.

Management approval must be received before accepting interview requests.

They must ensure they are clearly identified as AFP journalists.

They must assume that everything is on the record, and not let their guard down when the microphones or cameras are switched off.

If they are interviewed about a breaking news event they should not give more information than they have already filed for AFP. We should not scoop ourselves.

They must be careful in giving opinions – if they are asked to give analysis they must base their answers on their knowledge of the facts and avoid speculation. They must avoid contentious or inflammatory statements that could damage the image of AFP or jeopardise the safety of the Agency's correspondents or bureaux. They must be prepared to handle loaded questions, and must never disclose confidential information about AFP.

The same rules apply for all public speaking engagements, including addressing conferences or participating in panel discussions.

PRESENCE ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

AFP journalists identified as such on a social network must respect the Agency's values of impartiality and fairness and add a disclaimer in their profile that any opinions expressed are their own.

AFP journalists who participate on social networks on a professional basis should clearly identify themselves and indicate their position within the Agency. All breaking news should be filed first through AFP; we must not scoop ourselves on social networks.

AFP journalists also have a responsibility not to spread rumours on social networks. If they solely want to comment in a private context, they should open a separate account without referring to their work as a journalist for AFP.

The informal settings of social networks, such as Facebook, encourage debate, but AFP journalists must take care not to make comments that could raise doubts about their ability to provide unbiased coverage, or that could damage AFP's reputation for impartiality. They must never forget that social networks have the same if not greater reach as broadcast and other media which must be taken in to account when posting comments or expressing an opinion.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH SOURCES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social networks have become an indispensable tool for journalists and are a way of maintaining constant online contact with sources. However, we should be aware that social network relationships can raise questions about our impartiality. As an example, we should be cautious when accepting "friend" requests from our contacts. If we are obliged to "like" a Facebook page in order to follow a particular political party or candidate then we should also "like" their opponent's page in order to show balance.

5/ Financial coverage

GAINING ADVANTAGE

AFP journalists must not benefit financially from any financial or other information obtained in advance of its publication, nor pass that information on to others for their financial gain. If they are covering economic and financial news they should make themselves aware of the laws and regulations concerning insider trading.

PERSONAL AND FAMILY TIES TO BUSINESS

AFP journalists should declare any potential conflict of interest in their financial reporting to their bureau or service chief and to the regional editor. They should not cover companies in which they or their families invest directly or that they or their families own.

SECURITIES AND INVESTMENTS

It is preferable for AFP financial journalists to avoid direct holdings in company shares or other securities. There is less risk of a real or perceived conflict of interest when such investments are made through third party financial managers or in government bonds or mutual funds. AFP telephones or computers should never be used for stock market transactions.

CONSUMER NEWS

Major technology or other product launches can generate global interest and should be given the coverage they merit. However, we must maintain a neutral tone and not appear to be giving an endorsement. We must avoid repeating manufacturers' claims of first, biggest and best, unless we can independently verify the veracity of what they are saying.

COMPANY NEWS

AFP journalists have a responsibility to report corporate earnings fairly and accurately, casting aside company spin. Reporters should not allow themselves to be manipulated by "pro-forma" results etc. when they are aimed at disguising bad news.

DEALING WITH RUMOURS

When rumours move financial markets, we can report that fact, angled on the impact of the rumour. We should try to confirm the content of newsworthy rumours with the concerned parties, for example rumours of a takeover bid should be checked with the relevant companies.

We must avoid repeating defamatory material.

We must be careful to avoid spreading rumours, which may expose us to accusations of market manipulation. We may ask what is causing a market reaction, but should not volunteer the information about the rumour.

Market sources who confirm rumours may be liable to regulatory or legal action even when journalists are not. We must protect the identity of sources that require anonymity but treat their information with appropriate caution.

6/ Security, hostile environments, conflicts

The coverage of wars and other conflicts presents difficult challenges if we are to respect our principles of providing accurate, fair and balanced coverage.

Conflicts inevitably produce a flood of claims and counter-claims and we must do our best to present an accurate and truthful picture of events.

Given the very limited amount of independent reporting from conflict zones like Syria we have come to rely increasingly on uploaded content to try to form a picture of what is happening on the ground.

We must be scrupulous in verifying such content – social media have become the belligerents' platforms of choice for disseminating fake photos and videos and for spreading propaganda.

No matter how genuine the material may appear, we must always add a note of caution, (for example, "purporting to show the execution of XXX, which has not been confirmed").

Material sourced from armed groups and the military must be clearly identified as such, so that it is not mistaken for original AFP production.

We should solicit reactions to claims and accusations from the opposing sides whenever possible and also seek independent verification. If none is available, we should say so.

Particular care should be given to claims of military successes, territorial gains and casualty tolls. We do not report rumours, but at the same time, if rumours sweep a city and people react in the streets, it can become a story in itself.

Apart from inside quotes, we should avoid emotive language or military jargon ("collateral damage", "surgical strikes"). The careful use of language is particularly important in the highly charged atmosphere of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is essential to maintain a neutral tone.

USE OF GRAPHIC IMAGES

AFP and many other news media are faced with an increasing flow of graphic imagery from social networks, armed groups' propaganda videos, and from their own production.

Careful consideration must be given to the publication of a graphic image or video. Editors must ask if it adds to the understanding of the story in an essential way, or only appeals to morbid interest. Is it within the acceptable limits for a major media outlet? Does it cross the line into gore (dismembered limbs, mutilated bodies, executions, moment of death)? Will it cause distress to viewers or to the victim's family? Does it damage the dignity of the people involved?

We must also take into account the different cultures and standards of our customers worldwide when we distribute graphic content of a violent or sexual nature.

If an image or video is very graphic but still merits publishing in the public interest it should carry a warning. The final decision whether to publish lies with the chief editor.

The quantity of graphic images and videos has sharply increased the likelihood of editors suffering from visceral trauma. The management is sensitive to this possibility and guidelines on reducing the risk of developing PTSD have been posted on the AFP intranet. They are also available from the company doctor. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma has useful guidelines on handling graphic imagery posted on its website.

<http://dartcenter.org/content/working-with-traumatic-imagery#.VkF5Wr8ppQJ>

GRAPHIC IMAGES - HOSTAGES

The release of degrading images and videos of hostages, in particular by ISIS, raises specific editorial challenges. We have a responsibility to take into account the dignity of victims being paraded by extremists, as well as the potential distress to their families and other viewers. We must also avoid being used as a vehicle for hateful, ultra-violent propaganda.

That said, such images and videos can provide proof of life – or death – so they cannot be ignored. Our policy is to release only a small number of still images taken from these videos that can enable the victim to be identified, and also to show the executioner, but under no circumstances should we show the moment of execution or the aftermath. We do not distribute hostage statements made under duress, nor provide the perpetrators with a propaganda platform.

We also strive to publish photos or video of victims before their ordeal in order to preserve their personal dignity and to remind the public what they were like as individuals prior to their capture.

SAFETY

The most important thing in conflict reporting is the safety of our journalists and those who work with them. This must be the overriding factor when planning coverage. While conflict reporting is inherently dangerous we do our best to minimise the risks by sending journalists who have been trained to operate in hostile environments and who are equipped with full protective gear from helmets to flak jackets. Journalists going into conflict areas must also acquaint themselves with local laws that apply to such protective special gear. Some countries categorise them as weapons of war and impose tough legal restrictions on their import and export. Correspondents should also inform themselves of any restrictions on transporting such gear on airlines or other forms of transport. They should also consult the internal AFP security blog.

An AFP journalist has the right, without prejudice, to refuse a mission on safety grounds, and cut short a mission if he or she feels the situation is, or has become, too dangerous.

In line with several other major news media, AFP no longer accepts production from foreign freelancers operating in zones it regards as too dangerous for its own staff. The Agency is among the founding members of an international media coalition that adopted a code of global safety principles and practices for freelance journalists. It is recommended that journalists going into conflict zones familiarize themselves with these guidelines in advance.

<http://dartcenter.org/content/global-safety-principles-and-practices#.VjHTsGfouM8>

EMBEDS

Correspondents embedded with the military are obliged to follow strict rules that we would not accept in normal circumstances.

Embedded reporters are working in a military environment. They should treat all information from commanding officers and troops accordingly and guard against partisanship. It must be stated clearly in their text, photo or video production that the material was gathered while the journalist was embedded with the military.

ARMING OF JOURNALISTS

AFP journalists should wear protective gear in violent situations but must never carry weapons for self-defence. They should not wear camouflaged or other clothing that could leave them mistaken for a combatant. When appropriate, they should wear markings that clearly identify them as journalists.

HOSTAGES AND KIDNAPPING

The safety of hostages is paramount. AFP generally respects requests to withhold news of kidnappings if there are legitimate security reasons.

We should evaluate the situation as it develops, especially if other major media and agencies report the kidnapping and identify the victim. We can also face situations where the concerned parties – family, employers or a government – disagree over whether to publish.

As these are often life-and-death matters, the decision on how to proceed is the responsibility of the chief editor and the global news management.

The same holds for publishing images or videos of hostages, which can serve as a sign of life. We must avoid becoming the publicity vehicle for hostage takers in text, photo or video.

DUTY OF CARE TO SURVIVORS AND VICTIMS

Journalists often face the moral dilemma of either continuing their coverage, or assisting those who are injured or in danger.

There are many documented cases of journalists helping people in danger. Although we are deployed on the ground to provide news coverage we do not surrender our humanity. Whether to assist a person in need is a decision for the individual journalist to take based on the given circumstances and according to his or her conscience.

Providing news coverage and providing assistance in exceptional circumstances are not incompatible. Much has been written about this topic and it is a consensus that the journalist has an obligation to assist when an innocent person's life is in danger and no one other than the journalist can help.

At the same time we must also bear in mind that we are not trained for such interventions and going to assist can have unknown consequences for the journalist and the person being assisted. Our primary role is to bear witness and we should leave rescue work to first responders and relief workers when possible.

7/ User Generated Content/Eyewitness media

DEFINITION

The explosion in the use of smartphones and social networks around the world has had a significant impact on journalism. The key, opening moments of news events are now often captured by eyewitnesses on phones and rapidly uploaded onto platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Often these images play an essential role in telling the story, and sometimes they are the story. It has turned journalists into news verifiers as much as news gatherers, and also raised some key ethical issues.

We cannot expect to be first on the scene of all news events around the world, but we do play a vital role in sourcing, verifying and securing the rights to significant eyewitness media images, or User Generated Content.

VERIFICATION

The verification of content on social media platforms including photos, videos and information is an extremely important role of journalism in the digital era. AFP'S clients are frequently aware of breaking news or significant UGC images through Twitter feeds, but they rely on AFP to verify the information and secure the image rights.

Our clients rely on our core journalism principles to check and re-check the authenticity of content. At bureau and regional level, we need to develop our procedures to source and verify social network material quickly and efficiently. Any editorial question or doubt about a piece of eyewitness content should be rapidly reported to the chief editor.

VERIFICATION CHECKLIST

In line with our key ethical principles of provide accurate and truthful content, we must confirm the authenticity of any uploaded material before we redistribute it. We must never, as some media do, post material with the caveat that “the authenticity of this content could not be immediately verified”.

In the first instance we must judge if an image rings true. Always speak to the AFP journalist closest to the story to get an informed opinion. We must check with the source. We must make every possible effort to verify the image and ownership with the author or the subject of the material, and ensure the following:

- 1) Location: Does the image show the location that the source claims it does?
- 2) Time: Does the video or photo correspond to the date and time claimed?
- 3) Source: Is the source's identity and authorship confirmed?
- 4) Publication: Has the photo or video been published or is it exclusive?
- 5) Copyright: Is the image protected and if so what are the legal terms?

The AFP Fact-Checking Stylebook can be found [here](#).

RIGHTS AND LEGAL ISSUES

The central questions with every UGC photo or video are - who owns the content and who created it? Violating the copyright of a photo or video can have extremely serious consequences for AFP. We need to have written permission from the owner of the content to use, distribute and archive the content. We have drawn up a series of legally approved content request forms including shortened 140-character versions for contacting uploaders via Twitter. Any legal question or doubt about a piece of content should be rapidly reported to the chief editor's department for consideration by the news management and the legal department. With copyright issues we should always err on the side of caution.

USING UGC WITHOUT PERMISSION

There can be rare circumstances where important UGC material can be used without permission of the uploader. For example an overriding public interest claim can be significant. CCTV images and dashcams also have fewer restrictions. However a decision on whether AFP can use such images can only be taken by the editor-in-chief in coordination with the global news management and the legal department as necessary.

DEALING WITH SOURCES

It is important to deal fairly and transparently with sources on social media as we would with any other source. There are six key principles.

- Consider the physical and emotional welfare of eyewitnesses. Ensure that nobody is tempted to take risks in order to secure images for AFP.
- Be transparent; explain where and when the content will be used.
- Think of the intent of eyewitness when uploading content.
- Consider the impact on any person identifiable in the video or photo.
- Ask how an eyewitness wants to be credited.
- Work to make sure they feel fairly treated.

AFP will pay for authentic content produced by eyewitnesses if the news value justifies it.

CHILDREN

Journalists should be especially careful about using UGC that depicts children. In normal circumstances we should seek permission from a parent, guardian, teacher or other responsible individual before speaking to, photographing or filming children, and we should apply the same rules when publishing UGC which features children. The exceptions are when covering wars, disasters or other major breaking news, in which case a judgement should be made based on the news value of the story in consultation with the chief editor. We also need to be especially careful about using images shot by minors on smartphones. Such cases should be escalated for legal advice.

REACHING WITNESSES ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social networks are essential tools in contacting witnesses to events. However, there have been frequent cases where individuals have been inundated and harassed by information requests from media from around the world. While AFP cannot regulate the behaviour of other media, we must ensure that 1/ only one AFP journalist is designated to contact the individual - witnesses have complained of multiple requests from the same news organization; 2/ that we show courtesy and sensitivity, and do not put the witness at potential risk, such as asking them to gather additional material.

AFP's legal department has drawn up a series of user-friendly texts aimed at securing rights for photo and video content uploaded to social networks that are available from the editor-in-chief's department.

AFP'S UGC PROCEDURES

The work of sourcing and securing eyewitness content should be done at the bureau level where possible. The social media team in Paris is available to advise and help. Many regions have advanced social media users who should be encouraged to contribute. All UGC photos or videos should be thoroughly checked by regional editors. If there is any question or doubt at all, they should be sent to the editor-in-chief or deputy for final approval, with supporting documents and explanatory context. The editor-in-chief will consult with the global news management and the legal department as necessary before making a final decision.

8/ Artificial Intelligence

Generative Artificial Intelligence has become part of the journalist's toolkit and is expected to play an increasingly useful role in the future. The technology is still in its relatively early stages but here are some initial guidelines for its use at AFP:

AFP does not publish content directly created by generative AI in text, images or other formats, but we can use it under certain conditions to help us research and prepare stories.

AFP production come from the work and professionalism of its journalists.

The Agency recognizes that AI applications are helpful new tools for journalists and that their role will increase in the future, but it is important to remain vigilant about the potential dangers and shortcomings of this technology when it is used in newsgathering.

The quality, transparency and reliability of information remain our priority. AI tools can be used for tasks such as carrying out research, suggesting interview questions and summarising long texts. However, they should not be considered reliable or authoritative sources of information and the journalist has the responsibility to verify the responses they produce.

The agency asks its journalists to keep in mind that this technology is likely to produce inaccurate, biased, stereotypical and dated results.

We should not attribute human characteristics to chatbots or other AI creations such as avatars.

Journalists should not share confidential personal and professional information when using artificial intelligence applications.

For images, we must ensure that our freelance and third-party contributors do not provide us with AI-created content.

Social media posts sent in the name of AFP or its journalists must be written by the authors and not by third-party chatbots.

Translation tools can be used to help translate a word or short phrase as long as the results are double-checked. They should not be used to translate entire stories, which must be written in the AFP style with context, verified facts and correct terminology.

We can use voice to text transcription tools but the results should be checked against the original recordings. For security reasons, recordings of sensitive interviews that could put our sources at risk should not be uploaded to these applications.

The Agency is open to discussion and experimentation on the part of its journalists, who are invited to investigate the possibilities of AI as long as the results are not intended for direct publication.

9/ Images – graphics, photos and video

AI Graphics

SOURCING

All sources in a graphic must be clearly cited, unless it is giving commonly accepted facts.

The origin and the quality of the data used in the graphics must be carefully checked.

Graphics elements protected by copyright must not be used or copied. It is therefore important to check if copyright exists. Sources must be cited for graphic elements that are not commonly accessible and not protected by copyright.

Corporate or organizations' logos (protected by copyright) must not be used. Some exceptions are tolerated for sports team emblems.

If the graphic includes controversial or contested information the source should be referred to in the graphic, with justifications or explanations as required.

Sourcing should be updated according to AFP copy or new data.

Only AFP photos (or Getty USA only) are allowed in AFP graphics. Bylines for AFP photographers are given if a substantial part of the original composition is preserved in the graphic edit.

Maps should come from AFP map templates or from sources validated by the department management. Among them, mapping tools such as OpenStreetMap are becoming more reliable but they should be credited appropriately and edited correctly.

GENERAL ETHICAL/PROFESSIONAL ISSUES

Editors must be able to guarantee the accuracy of information and data contained in a graphic. Use the AFP network to check information and anticipate coverage. Facts and figures used in graphics should always correspond with AFP text stories or other validated AFP content such as photo and video. Any discrepancies must be flagged up with the relevant bureau or service and/or with the chief editor.

Particular vigilance is needed during translation and proofreading of graphics, with regard to both the text and graphic elements. Good proof reading comprises three phases: the coherence and general relevance of the graphic, the text content (form and shape, spelling, font,) and the graphic content (accuracy, choice of colours).

Graphics content must be consistent with other AFP content. The general editorial instructions apply to graphics, particularly in the case of not publishing hostage pictures on the web.

Visual presentations must be in line with reality. Nuance and scale must be measured to reflect varying degrees of certainty or importance. Artists and editors should be aware of that and use their good judgement in presentation. Particular care should be taken when choosing the type of graphic to illustrate information (absolute value, percentage, momentum, distribution...) as well as paying attention to the basis and scale selected to avoid distortions.

What goes into a graphic is necessarily selective. The information hierarchy in a graphic must be justified. We should always be prepared to defend the graphic even if an explanation is not required within the graphic.

Any graphic published on AFP social network sites must include an AFP watermark.

B/ Photo

SOME BASIC RULES

- Respect the anonymity of those who request for legitimate reasons by pixelating their image or only showing them from an unrecognisable angle.
- Do not take images of minors without the authorisation, preferably in writing, of their parents or another responsible adult unless you are in a breaking news situation where there is no alternative.
- Avoiding taking or publishing degrading images of people, unless they are of sufficient stature and importance (for example the images released of Saddam Hussein receiving a medical examination after being captured).
- Avoid using close ups of wounds, dismembered limbs or corpses. If an image or video is very graphic but merits being published because of its overriding news value it should carry a warning. The final decision whether to publish lies with the chief editor.
- Specify the origin of images received from third parties such as handouts and pool reports.
- Avoid distorting reality by editing which gives a misleading impression of the situation (such as a close up of soldiers that makes them look more numerous than they are).

STAGING AND RE-ENACTMENTS

Photographers must not stage or re-enact news events. They must not direct the subjects of their images or add, remove or move objects to improve the image in a news event. AFP's news photography must depict reality. Any attempt to alter that reality constitutes fabrication.

Photographers may direct the subjects of portraits, formal interviews and non-news feature images needed to illustrate a story. Then the caption must not mislead the reader into believing that these images were spontaneous.

When the behaviour shown by the subject is the result of the media's presence, our captions mention it. If other photographers orchestrate or set up scenes, it is still a setup!

Composite images that show the progression of an event (e.g. lunar eclipse, time lapse) must indicate the technique in their captions. They are never acceptable in a news assignment.

Captions must also make clear when a specialty lens (e.g. lens babies, tilt-shift lenses) or a special technique (e.g. soft focus, zooming) has been used to create an image in portraiture or on a features assignment.

Some of our photographs are taken under controlled conditions in which photographers cannot operate freely. This is particularly true during conflicts and in countries where the media's movements are restricted. Such photographs must say if the image was taken during an organized or escorted visit or an embed unless the photographer was truly free to work independently.

CAPTIONS

Just as our news photographs must reflect reality, so too should our captions.

They must adhere to the basic journalistic rules of accuracy and must answer the basic questions of good journalism: Who is in the picture? Where was it taken? When was it taken? What does it show? Why is a subject doing a particular thing?

Captions are written in the present tense and should use concise, simple English.

The caption must explain the circumstances in which a photograph was taken and state the correct date in both the caption and the IPTC field.

Captions must not contain assumptions by the photographer about what might have happened, even when a situation seems likely. All information about an event must be sourced unless you are certain of your information.

Captions should not make assumptions. Stick to what the photo shows and what you know.

The photo editor in charge of working on the picture will come back to the photographer or the chief photographer with questions if the caption does not fully explain the image.

For this reason, photographers must remain contactable until their work is published on the wire or on Imageforum.

IMAGE PROCESSING (WITH PHOTOSHOP OR OTHER SOFTWARE)

The rules are:

- No additions or deletions to the subject matter of the original image. (thus changing the original content and journalistic integrity of an image)
- No excessive lightening, darkening or blurring of the image. (thus misleading the viewer by disguising certain elements of an image)
- No excessive colour manipulation. (thus dramatically changing the original lighting conditions of an image)

The guidelines are:

- Only minor Photoshop work should be performed in the field, especially in bad lighting conditions.
- When working under prime conditions, some further minor Photo-shopping (performed within the above rules) is acceptable.

This includes basic colour correction, subtle lightening/darkening of zones, sharpening, removal of dust and other minor adjustments that fall within the above rules. All photographers should understand the limitations of their laptop screens and their working environments.

Photographers should trust the desks to carry out the basic functions to prepare their images for the wire. Good communication with the desk is essential.

- Multiple-Exposure pictures must be clearly identified in the caption and drawn to the attention of pictures desks before transmission.

C/ Video

The AFP editorial rules apply equally to text, photo, graphics and video and should be applied with equal rigour.

There must be coherence between our video coverage and the content on the text wire.

Shooting video images – just like for photo – takes place in a complex legal context where there is often a need for compromise between the right of the individual to protect their image and private life and the right of the public to be informed.

If there is any doubt the journalist should err on the side of the public's right to know, and then consult with the service head or chief editor who in turn may contact the legal department.

AFP video journalists must respect the following rules:

- It is forbidden to have a scene enacted by third parties but it is permissible to ask a person to repeat a gesture he or she does routinely.
- It is forbidden to film using hidden cameras except in exceptional circumstances where there is security or other legitimate reasons.
- It is forbidden to elicit a desired phrase from a person who is being interviewed. Our questioning must be open and aimed at giving the interviewee the maximum opportunity to respond freely. It is permissible to ask an interviewee to rephrase their statement.
- In general, we consider that people who have seen the camera have given their tacit approval to be filmed. At the same time we should respect the anonymity of those who request it. In that situation it is preferable to film the hands or feet rather than the face. If the face is filmed then it should be blurred to prevent identification. The voice may also be disguised.
- The identity of minors is protected in many countries and you must abide by the local law. If we are filming children we must obtain the authorisation of the parents or another responsible person, if possible in writing. This is not always possible in wars, natural disasters or other breaking news situations, in which case we must use our editorial judgement and if necessary consult with the chief editor.
- We should avoid publishing degrading images of people. We must know the local legislation concerning the filming of people who have been arrested, charged or are facing trial.
- In the event of filming people with diminished responsibility who may not realise they are on camera (people with mental health problems, injured or intoxicated people), we must obtain authorisation from another responsible person (relatives or health professionals). It may be possible to film intoxicated people as the illustration, for example, of a story about excessive alcohol consumption, but their face and any identifying marks must be blurred to protect their identity.
- We should not sanitize violence but neither should we film, as a general rule, closeups of wounds, dismembered limbs or corpses.

Careful consideration must be given to the filming and publishing of a graphic image – does it add to the understanding of the story in an essential way or just appeal to morbid interest?

If an image or images are very strong but still merit publishing the public interest, they should carry a graphic image warning.

- When we distribute images provided by governments, the authorities, the army or armed groups, we must clearly explain the origin and the context in which they were filmed. The viewer must know the source of the images and not confuse them with original AFP production.
- We must clearly identify the source of images obtained from third parties such as pool reports, television broadcasters and production companies. Images from third parties often have usage restrictions that may range from territorial exclusions to usage for a specific platform or a specific time period only, etc. All restrictions must be clearly marked in the dopesheet.
- If we name people in our video reports we must verify and confirm their identity, including double-checking the spelling of their name and other personal details. If images have been taken in circumstances which could breach the law then we should consult the chief editor and possibly the legal department. Remember that the law that applies is the law in the location where the filming was done.
- While editing images and soundbites, we must ensure that the impression given by the final sequence must correspond to the reality of the event. For example, showing a close-up of a group of soldiers or armoured vehicles can be misleading and give the impression that they are more numerous than they actually are. The image must reflect the reality, not distort it.
- Do not be tempted to manipulate the image so that it corresponds to the text, which must correspond to what was seen and heard.
- Video reporters on a foreign mission, in particular in conflict or other sensitive situations, must submit their scripts to the local bureaux and liaise closely with them. By doing so they will increase their knowledge of the situation, avoid taking unnecessary risks and avoid putting the bureau and its staff in potential danger.
- Just as with dispatches, dopesheets must be edited by another journalist before being published.
- It is imperative to give clear and accurate information on the exact location and date of all the images shot.
- People may sometimes request compensation for an interview. Consult with the service head or chief editor.
- Artworks, exhibitions or items covered by intellectual or artistic copyright (usually artworks less than 70 years old) must follow AFP legal guidelines and be filmed in such a way as to prevent extraction and commercialisation of an image. Artworks must be filmed in context, e.g. people in the frame, several artworks hanging on a wall, a pan shot from one artwork to another. Many exhibitions, films, plays, concerts, etc. impose time restrictions after which reuse or commercialisation of the images are forbidden.

AVANT D'IMPRIMER, PENSEZ A NOTRE PLANETE !

