The Virginian-Pilot Newsroom Code of Ethics and Professionalism

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1. “The Duty of Landmark Newspapers”
By Frank Batten Sr.

Newspapers live entirely on the bounty of the public. The ability of journalists to report and to comment is based upon a unique grant of freedom from the public. Thus our duty is clear: It is to serve the public with skill and character, and to exercise First Amendment freedoms with vigor and responsibility.

Our news reports should never be influenced by the private interests of the owners or of any other group. Our editorials should exhibit vigor and courage, always respectful of contrary opinion, never tailored to the whims of the editor or publisher.

We aim to build a tradition of excellence for our newspapers. We must be aggressive in publishing the news. The independence of our editors, reporters and photographers is not for sale. There are no sacred cows. No territory of legitimate public interest is off limits to fair and competent reporting and comments.

Freedom makes a place for excellence. That place must be filled with professional discipline, with respect for the public we serve, and with a keen sense of fairness to all individuals. We must never pander to passions or forget for a moment the power of the printed word to do wrong as well as to right wrong.

Let us forget old slogans of dead days. Instead of "Get it first and get it right," let our rule be: "First, get it right." When mistakes occur, we should correct them promptly and forthrightly. Excellence cannot flourish without criticism. We need criticism and should seek it. Lacking trust, a newspaper cannot serve or advance any worthy purpose.

The first priority of Landmark newspapers is to present a faithful and accurate picture of the life of their communities. This requires detailed coverage of local events, institutions and people’s activities.

Warts and problems are at the core of news, but they are not all of the news. Even against the tide of modern life, people and institutions make progress. We should be generous in coverage of achievement; our pages should reflect the grit, devotion and durability of the human spirit. Let us nourish hope. While exposure of wrongdoing is a proper function and on occasion a required function of newspapers, it is not the main purpose. Problems are shaped more often by circumstance than by venality. Corruption and conflicts of interest, in most communities, have little to do with the important things that are not working. Most of our communities’ failures are rooted in complex problems. A truly excellent newspaper will spend most of its investigative skills on explaining those circumstances. We misdirect readers if we concentrate on narrow problems and inflate their significance.
A great newspaper is distinguished by the balance, fairness and authority of its reporting and editing. Such a newspaper searches as hard for strengths and accomplishment as for weakness and failure. Rather than demoralize its community, the great newspaper will, by honest and intelligent journalism, inspire people to do better.

Frank Batten became publisher of The Virginian-Pilot in 1954 and served as chairman of Landmark Communications from 1967 to 1998. This statement was written in the 1970s.

2. Who is covered by this policy?

Staff members
The ethics policy applies to all newsroom employees, full and part time.

Freelancers
As independent contractors, freelance contributors cannot legally be required to adhere to the ethics policy; however, assigning editors will judge freelance work based on the standards in The Pilot's ethics policy. Assigning editors should present freelancers with a written copy of this policy when they sign a contract to write, edit or otherwise work for us independently.

It is the freelancer's responsibility to inform editors of potential conflicts, such as a personal or business relationship with the subject of a story. If the editor determines a conflict exists, the freelancer will be removed from the assignment.

3. Newsroom standards

Guiding principle: Tell the truth in a fair manner.

This section has guidelines for dealing with some specific situations. When in doubt, remember the guiding principle.

This collection of guidelines is in alphabetical order:

- Contests
- Corrections
- Diversity
- Fairness and taste
- Plagiarism/quotes
- Racial and ethnic identification
- Research and accuracy
• Sources
• Visual accuracy
• Writing techniques

A. CONTESTS
We enter journalism contests only when the judges of the entries are journalists, or where a majority of the judging panel are journalists. In cases where a community advocacy group gives us an award we did not apply for, we can accept it at the discretion of the editor.

B. CORRECTIONS
We will protect our credibility with a vigorous commitment to accuracy. We will remedy, in a timely manner, all factual errors with a correction or clarification. If you become aware of an error in your own or others’ published work, you have a responsibility to notify the author or the team leader as soon as possible.

A correction is used when a fact in the story is wrong.

A clarification is used to shed more light on something that is not incorrect, but might not have shown the entire, clear picture of a given situation.

a. Online corrections
Errors must be corrected online as soon as they’re discovered.

A note should be added to the bottom of the story to indicate a correction was made. The correction should avoid repeating the error unless the resulting correction would leave readers confused. If possible, be transparent with readers about the source of the error — if it was an editing error or a source error, say so.

For serious errors, especially in headlines, fix it and let a senior editor know. If a story contains multiple egregious errors, it could be withdrawn. But any discussion about doing so should include the editor, who must give approval. If a story is unpublished for such a reason, the editor should consider writing a column or note to readers to explain why.

Stories that are inadvertently posted before reporting or editing is complete may be unpublished without the editor’s permission, but inform the digital news desk that you did so.

A breaking news story that updates with information that differs from an earlier version does not necessarily require a correction, depending on the severity of the change. The story could be worded to reflect the change and show why it happened.

b. Print corrections
If a story contained an error, the reporter and/or editor of the story must ensure a correction is published as soon as possible. Just like with online, the correction should avoid repeating the error unless the resulting correction would leave readers confused.

c. Multiple corrections from a single source
If a pattern of corrections emerges from the same source or the same newsroom employees, a senior editor will review the situation and put corrective actions in place. Multiple corrections from a newsroom staffer are considered a performance issue.

C. DIVERSITY
We will accurately and fairly reflect the diversity of gender, color, ethnicity, class, generation, sexual orientation, geography, political views and other attributes that distinguish our communities.

This standard requires our staff to go beyond the usual suspects when seeking sources. The ideal is to have the community’s diverse groups represented in whom we cite, regardless of the theme or topic being covered. The principle holds true for all stories and topics.

Reporters, editors and photographers will accomplish this by ensuring that their source lists include women, minorities, people from different political viewpoints and representatives of other communities.

D. FAIRNESS AND TASTE
In our commitment to fair play, we:

● Treat all sources the same, whether friendly or hostile. We evaluate all sources based on the newsworthiness of their information. We report stories involving The Pilot, Landmark Media Enterprises and its executives just like any other.
● Report all sides of a story. We are upfront with readers about what we don’t know and about evidence that contradicts the main finding of a news story.
● Attempt to give people who have been arrested and/or charged an opportunity to respond whenever possible, either directly or through a lawyer. This is especially needed on a story longer than a brief. In addition, it is our goal to report the final outcome of cases where we have reported the name of an individual who was arrested.
● Give the outcome of a case similar treatment to the initial stories when possible. This varies based on specifics, but the goal is to be fair in how we treat stories involving accusations.
● Do not make promises to sources about when we will publish a story, photo or video online or in print. It is not appropriate to promise a certain “play” of a story online or in print.

a. Past stories
If a subject of a news story contacts The Pilot and asks that we provide an update on his/her case because charges were dropped or drastically revised, we will seriously consider doing so. We cannot expunge our database of the initial story if asked to do so; it would be unethical to pretend it never existed. We also do not modify the original story. However, if in the eyes of a senior editor an update is appropriate, we will look into the situation and update the original story with an editor’s note. These requests are infrequent, but are relevant if charges were dropped or the person was found not guilty and we did not cover the outcome when it happened.

b. Crime reporting
We identify criminal suspects only after arrest warrants have been issued, they have been arrested or they have been formally charged. We also report when police are seeking a person of interest, and in that scenario it is imperative to be clear that police only want to ask questions and do not see the person as a suspect in the crime.

Avoid the use of “alleged” or “allegedly” in stories and headlines. Instead, cite the source when a headline needs to be attributed, e.g. “Police say man shot officer”. When in doubt, over-attribute.

As a rule, we do not name juvenile suspects. We do identify suspects 14 or older who are charged with committing crimes serious enough to warrant their prosecution as adults. With the approval of the editor, we may name suspects younger than 14 when the act is public, particularly brutal or of widespread concern to the community.

We do not typically name victims of non-fatal crimes, particularly crimes of violence, without contacting them in advance. We do not name witnesses of crimes without trying to contact them in advance. We are particularly sensitive on cases where here’s a legitimate concern for their safety. We do not name victims of sexual crimes unless they agree to be named. A particular problem comes when a story is reported with a victim’s name, and it later emerges that they are a victim of a sexual assault. A senior editor should be consulted as to how future stories should identify the person.

When we are doing a “be on the lookout” story, it is our policy to put as many differentiating details in as possible. We do not identify the race of a suspect without further identifying information.

Grade schools and colleges frequently receive bomb threats. While reporting on them could lead to “copycat” threats, we may provide updates to readers if there has been visible public action related to the threat such as a large evacuation.

When a public safety incident involves a public figure, we should apply our usual standards for determining whether a story is warranted. And, the public figure’s response to the situation (e.g. cursing at a police officer, refusing a Breathalyzer) could determine news coverage.
When a public safety incident involves someone closely connected to a public figure, we should apply our usual standards for determining whether a story is warranted.

c. Suicide
When we report on a death we should state the cause, including suicide, whether the person is a public or private individual. We also should say whether a death is being investigated as a suicide.

If a death is deemed newsworthy and it is a suicide, we will report it as such. If a death happens in a public place (e.g. a street in a city, a bridge), and the subsequent investigation affects people (e.g. traffic), that generally makes it newsworthy.

Nothing should take precedence over news judgment. But, staff members should be aware of possible copycat effects of suicide coverage. We should carefully consider whether to include the method of suicide.

Reporters, editors and digital editors should weigh whether to include resources such as suicide hotline numbers. Treat this as the same as any story about a death or an illness. We would not automatically put the number for an AIDS hotline with an AIDS story, but there are times when we might.

E. PLAGIARISM/QUOTES
Plagiarism is wrong. We do not use sentences or paragraphs from other sources without giving credit. Two exceptions: First, the material in question is from previous Pilot stories. The editor of a given story will decide if credit to previous Pilot stories is required. Second, in stories combining staff and wire reports, a blanket attribution at the beginning or end is sufficient.

“Approximate” quotations can undermine readers’ trust. Therefore, quotes should reflect exactly what a source said. If the source’s grammar or language is unsuitable, paraphrase.

When paraphrasing, remain faithful to the original statement. Quotes should fairly reflect the context of the conversation.

Do not attempt to capture dialect or mangled pronunciation, unless it is an essential element of a story.

F. RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION
We identify someone’s race or ethnicity only when it is important to understanding the story.

Identify race evenly. Stories that deal with racial conflict or identify people by race because that’s the topic should identify all the characters in the story by race.
If a source raises the topic of race, it can become more justifiable to include the topic in a story. Tell the entire story, of which race could be a key part — not the only one.

a. Race in crime stories
Two basic tenets of good journalism, accuracy and precision, require us to identify a suspect’s race only as part of a detailed physical description. We only identify the race of a victim or suspect when relevant.

A suspected criminal’s identifying information should exclude that person from all but a narrow group of people. Recognize that authorities generally share what they can, but reporters must press for more details, or a photo, when vague descriptions are provided.

Poor examples: “A 6-foot tall Hispanic man in his 20s”; “A 5-foot-8 black male of medium build.” These vague descriptions don’t provide valuable information to help readers assist police.

Good example: “An olive-skinned male, 25 to 30 years old, 5 feet 7 inches, weighing 130 pounds, with thinning hair, wearing blue jeans and a Dallas Cowboys hat and driving a black Caravan.”

You should factor in the severity and immediacy of a crime when choosing to use a vague description of the criminal. If a crime is immediate and ongoing, and lives could be at stake, we have a responsibility to present the best physical description available from official sources. We must keep in mind that initial descriptions might be incorrect, and they should append a story with an updated, corrected description as quickly as possible.

G. RESEARCH AND ACCURACY
a. Use of internet sources
The most important thing to remember when consulting online sources: assess, verify and confirm as much as possible. Do not take anything at face value. Use internet “wayback” sites, domain registry information and image analyses to verify websites, their ownership and photos, respectively.

Be urgent, but be cautious. It gets easier every day for people to fool others, with fake news or misleading information. Always corroborate information.

When the news value of a situation outweighs the potential for being wrong or bringing harm, be transparent with the reader. Say that “this claim could not be verified” or indicate your own level of skepticism in some way. If possible, consult a senior editor before doing so.

b. Credit photos and facts from outside sources
Generally, credit photos and graphics downloaded from the internet, including mugshots. icons do not need credits. When a photo of a breaking news incident is found on the internet, take
every step to gain the photographer’s permission to use the photo, with full credit to them. Do not use a photo without permission, unless OK’d by a senior editor.

If a photo is found on social media, know that the user might have posted a photo from another user’s post and presented it as if it were his/her own. Verify whether a social media user is the photographer of the image you want to use, and ask permission to use it.

If a post is public, embed the post in the story online. If an embed is not available, link to the post. Either way, cite where the information is from — a Facebook post, tweet, etc. Using the photo in the context it was displayed gives us some ethical and legal protections.

When seeking out images of people, be wary of professional-looking photographs (including yearbook photos and studio images). The person in the image rarely has the rights to the image; the professional photographer does. (Politicians’ headshots or those of other public officials are likely exceptions.)

On text, all information should be attributed, just as we would information from any source. Our prohibition against plagiarism applies to this information.

c. Link to websites from a story
Links to previous stories on a topic are encouraged. Links to outside content are permissible if they give additional news value to the reader.

d. Text interviews
Interviews conducted over email, text message or social media are sometimes necessary and practical. Be transparent about how interviews are conducted. If it is an email interview, say so. Say if a quote came from a text message.

H. SOURCES
First and foremost: Treat every source fairly and with respect. Being fair to sources does not mean shielding public officials who refuse to comment on stories. Always identify yourself as a journalist at The Virginian-Pilot so sources know their comments could be published. Any exceptions to these source rules or to not identifying yourself as a journalist must be approved by the editor.

a. Types of sources
Here are our internal definitions. (Keep in mind: Not all potential sources may know these.)
• On the record: The source’s identity and information can be used.
• Anonymous: The source’s identity cannot be used.
• On background/not for attribution: A source provides information that can be used in a story but the source cannot be identified. The source and reporter must agree on this before the information is shared.
• Off the record: This information cannot be published and the source’s identity cannot be disclosed. Reporters can use the information to develop other sources for the story without revealing the off-the-record source.

b. Anonymous sources
Restricting the use of anonymous sources is essential for protecting our integrity and credibility. The Virginian-Pilot strives to limit the use of anonymous sources. Every effort should be made to get the information on the record. If a source’s name is to be withheld, efforts must be taken to corroborate that information with other sources on the record (preferred) or anonymously.

An offer of confidentiality should be given by a reporter only as a last resort. Any promise of confidentiality is an agreement between the source and the Pilot, not an individual staff member.

The use of an anonymous source in a story must be approved by a senior editor or the editor. The source’s identity must be disclosed to the team leader and another editor. Reporters cannot promise that they will not share the source’s identity with their editors. Anyone in the company who learns the identity of an anonymous source is bound by the terms of the confidentiality extended to the source.

We will not permit an unnamed source to attack a person or institution. Opinions of unnamed sources may be used to help a reporter shape a more complete picture of a person or institution, but should not be a guiding force or portrayed as such, except with approval of a senior editor or the editor.

Any exceptions to the guidelines for anonymous sources must be approved by the editor.

When we decide that sources’ identities will be shielded, we must tell the readers as much as possible about the unnamed sources, short of revealing their identities, including the reason for anonymity. Attempt to give readers an idea of who the individuals are and why their information might be significant enough for us to hide their identities. Reporters should work out with their sources how they will be identified, subject to approval by their supervising editor.

Never use a plural such as “sources,” “officials,” “experts” or “aides” when there is only one source.

Reporters must shield anonymous sources from all but their team leader, senior editor and editor. In some cases, the editors will ask whether the source is willing to be publicly revealed should the paper face a libel action. This could affect how the Pilot’s handles the story.

These guidelines also can apply to less sensitive, routine stories. Single benign comments from unidentified people may be used to add ambiance to a story and are acceptable.

c. Reaching sources
Try to reach a source through all avenues — cellphone, office and, when necessary, at home.

It’s best to avoid using vague phrases such as “unavailable for comment” or “could not be reached” because those phrases don’t explain to readers what happened. Tell readers that a source “didn’t return calls to his office or cell phone Wednesday afternoon.” (It is implied that you left a voicemail.) There is no need to be overly specific.

d. **Web sources**
Anonymous comments from websites or social media should not be used as source material in stories. The same standards apply to these sources as to other sources. If online comments are used, the sources should be verified and identified by full name.

d. **Wire policy**
Wire stories that use anonymous sources will be viewed with a critical eye, but may be used from traditional news sources such as the Associated Press or The Washington Post.

e. **Pre-publication review**
We encourage reporters to call sources to verify quotes or information. For accuracy’s sake, you may read back passages of a story. However, we do not allow sources to approve or review stories before publication.

I. **VISUAL ACCURACY AND STANDARDS**

a. **Documentary photos and videos**
These should accurately reflect a given situation. We do not alter news photos, except for cropping. We do not re-enact news situations. Submitted photos must meet the same standard. Posed portrait photos are acceptable. If you have a doubt about a submitted photo’s authenticity, check with a photo editor.

b. **Photo illustrations**
These are acceptable in some cases and must be clearly labeled. It should be obvious to the reader that the photo is not a candid documentary photo.

c. **Icon photos**
Much like photo illustrations, almost anything goes. That includes simple photos that illustrate or label stories. Examples include photos of planes, ships, money, hockey sticks, hands, buildings, etc. Cut-out photos would be included here. It is not necessary to credit these photos.

d. **To use or not to use**
Photographers and videographers often are thrust into situations where they chronicle events that may not be suitable for publication in print and/or online. The editing process will determine whether the photo will be used.
The two platforms have different audiences and different impact. On photos and videos of questionable taste or appropriateness, visual editors should be consulted first and then other editors consulted as needed.

There could be cases where a photo/video is appropriate for the online platform and not for print, especially if it is in the context of a slideshow or clearly labeled before a user sees it.

e. Live video
The evolving world of live coverage presents challenges. Newsroom policy is that no staffer can do a live Facebook event without prior training. It is occasionally preferable to do the coverage with a second person. A disclaimer should be added to the Facebook post if foul language is being used.

J. WRITING TECHNIQUES
a. Fictional names
On occasion, a fictional name may be used for a real person when there is good reason to believe that public identification would cause severe embarrassment or harm to that person. Approval must be obtained from a senior editor. Readers should be informed the name is fictional in a prominent manner.

b. Re-creating past events
In re-creating past events, readers should be informed the sources recalling the information in a prominent manner.

4. Personal conduct in the course of work

Guiding principle: We are not beholden to those seeking to influence us.

A. EXPENSES
The Pilot pays for travel, meals, lodging and other expenses for employees covering political campaigns, candidates, public officials, institutions, private businesses and other newsmaking entities. Good manners and common sense prevail. For example, there’s no reason to worry about reimbursing a source who drives you on a tour of a town.

The Pilot pays for all expenses related to covering news and feature stories. Free admission for a reporter or photographer to an event is permissible when there is no expectation this will affect our coverage.

The Pilot will pay for business meals with sources. It is also permissible to split the cost of the lunch with the source.
The military customarily provides free transportation for journalists on a space-available basis on vehicles traveling in the course of their duties. Staffers on assignment can accept free travel on military vehicles when there’s no other way of gaining access. Special trips provided by the military with the intent of increasing public understanding of its mission will be allowed in some instances, but they should be approved by the team leader or senior editor.

B. INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Do not post or share internal Pilot or proprietary information with the general public. All company meetings, newsroom meetings, etc., are considered internal unless otherwise specified.

All email and electronic communications must be written in a professional manner. You must not complain about sources, give opinions on news situations, or do anything else that you would not want to be made public.

C. COOPERATION WITH AUTHORITIES

Journalists are not required to turn over to any authorities their notes, photos or videos unless directed to do so by a court. If you receive such a request, contact your editor or senior editor immediately.

During coverage of a news event, reporters and photographers often discuss basic information with law enforcement personnel. But if police want to ask you what someone said to you, you don’t have to cooperate.

It is our general practice not to provide published photographs or videos, or copies of published articles to attorneys in civil or criminal matters without a subpoena. It is our general practice to actively oppose the release of unpublished information.

Staff members are forbidden from working for the CIA, FBI or any other governmental intelligence or law enforcement agency. If you are approached, inform the editor.

D. PILOT COVERAGE/ COMPETITION

Sometimes the Pilot’s coverage becomes a story itself. If that happens, especially in the case of a source criticizing the Pilot’s coverage publicly, another reporter should cover that follow-up criticism, if possible.

Staffers need permission of a senior editor or the editor to be interviewed by other members of the media about their story.

Do not publicly criticize competitors or colleagues on social media or other public channels without first talking to a senior editor or the editor. Social media can be used to correct an error in a competitor’s news story in a professional manner.
E. BROADCAST/INTERNET APPEARANCES
Requests to participate in radio, internet or television programs or broadcasts must be cleared by a team leader. While on the air or in any situation in the public eye, staff members should demonstrate a high standard of impartiality, just as in our news pages. Analysis is acceptable. Generally, a staff member should not say anything on radio, TV or the internet that could not appear under his or her byline in the Pilot.

The same principles of professionalism apply to websites, social media or any other online content that news staffers create. Such content should not contain opinion or speculation on topics the newspaper covers, unless those opinions and speculations also could appear under the staffer’s byline.

5. Personal conduct outside of work

A. FREELANCE AND OTHER WORK
The Virginian-Pilot must come first for the news staff. That means focusing our time, talent and energy on the newsroom’s mission. Therefore, all freelance work — even for other Pilot publications — requires permission from a senior editor or the editor. Freelance work is allowed when it does not harm the mission of the Pilot newsroom. Editors will not allow freelance work for direct competitors, those seeking to fill the same mission in Hampton Roads as The Pilot.

Here are examples of cases where permission is needed. This is not just a formality; in some cases permission will not be given.
• Freelance work for all other print or electronic media.
• Freelance work for all other Pilot Media properties
• Freelance work for charitable organizations
• Freelance work for private individuals (such as wedding photography)
• Freelance work using your journalistic skills for commercial, non-journalism companies is forbidden in nearly all circumstances, however, you may discuss it with your supervisor.
• Freelance work involving opinion pieces for an outside news source is forbidden in nearly all circumstances, except when involving First Amendment issues.

Company resources, such as computers and cameras, should not be used for freelance work. It may be used for work for non-newsroom publications owned by Pilot Media.

Part-time employees are covered by this same policy. They should inform team leaders of outside freelance work. Given the special situation of part-time work, the Pilot will seek ways to accommodate their needs.

Part-time work
Part-time, non-journalism work by full-time employees is allowed after informing a senior editor or the editor, so long as it does not interfere with the full-time job.

B. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

a. Public life
Staff members are encouraged to participate in professional, civic and cultural activities. To ensure that our credibility is not damaged, staff members have a special responsibility to avoid conflicts of interest or any activity that would compromise their journalistic integrity. Some sources and readers look for any impropriety and will seize upon even the appearance of it. We must retain their trust. When all else fails, exercise great caution and excuse yourself from civic activities.

Newsroom employees must not work for a political candidate or officeholder on a paid or voluntary basis. Attendance at rallies or public demonstrations for political causes should be carefully considered. Participation in such demonstrations (including clapping, cheering and carrying signs) is strictly forbidden. If you choose to attend such an event, be aware that you could be photographed, and even being a static attendee photographed at a rally could give the wrong impression of your objectivity.

Taking a public stand on controversial social, religious or political issues is prohibited. Such expression also is prohibited on personal websites, social networks and other online forums. This includes signing of petitions, either on paper or online. There could be “gray areas” here, so talk to your supervisor.

Holding public office or accepting political appointment is prohibited, unless specifically approved by the editor and publisher.

If a newsroom employee has a close relative or friend working in a political campaign, the staffer should not cover or make news judgments about that campaign. If in doubt, talk to an editor.

Donating money to political campaigns, political action committees and parties is prohibited, except for those dealing with free press issues. Donations to or memberships in organizations with strongly political agendas should be carefully considered. Donating or contributing to a civic or school group is permissible.

Staff members should use common sense when displaying bumper stickers, pins, badges and other signs online and offline. Do not display items that promote political or controversial causes.

b. Civic activities
Membership in a social or civic organization normally does not result in a conflict; however, staff members should never cover or make news decisions about groups to which they belong. Such
activities should be disclosed to a team leader. It is inappropriate to have the organization publicly identify you as a Pilot newsroom employee in publicity materials.

If you join/participate in a group that finds itself as a subject of news coverage, recuse yourself from the coverage.

Paid or volunteer public relations work for any organization whose operations are covered by the newspaper is prohibited.

Serving on the board of a region-wide charitable organization requires the approval of the editor. Membership on boards of charitable or cultural organizations that are covered by our news organization – the SPCA, United Way, theater groups, etc. – must be approved by a senior editor.

It is inappropriate for staff members to publicly appear and advocate on behalf of a civic group or themselves. An exception can be made when an organization’s policy or action directly affects the employee. In this case, talk with your team leader.

c. Business conflicts
Staff members may not have financial investments in companies they cover except as part of a diverse mutual fund.

Investments, loans or other outside business activities that could conflict with the newspaper’s ability to report news must be avoided.

Use of inside knowledge for personal gain, financial or otherwise, is prohibited.

Staff members should not enter into a business relationship with current news sources.

d. Gifts, favors, events
Employees must never become obligated to news sources, advertisers, suppliers or any person or organization from which they have received gifts or favors. Situations will arise that call for judgment. Let common sense prevail. Offer to pay for all meals you receive, when practicable. If you have any doubt, check with your team leader.

We do not accept free or discounted trips, meals, entertainment, gifts or admission to events, including from our own advertising representatives, for personal use.

Newsroom employees may take advantage of discounts and free offerings formally provided to the company through corporate partnerships with the Pilot or Landmark Media Enterprises. In cases where questions might arise, the editor or managing editor will decide.
Use of press passes — or accepting free admission — is limited to those assigned to cover an event and other staff members with a clear journalistic purpose for attending. Team leaders will determine appropriate staffing. Extra passes should not be given to friends or family. Staff members can attend media-day events only if they are involved in news coverage.

Tangible items worth more than $10 delivered to staff members should be returned, donated to charity or sold through company events that benefit charity. Review copies of books, movies, computer software and music may be kept by the reviewer. They may not be re-sold. Material not scheduled for review falls under the return-or-donate rule. When possible, let gift-givers know their gifts were donated. Items valued at $10 or less — desk trinkets, pens, etc. — may be kept.

e. Special privileges
Company identification cards are not to be used for personal purposes, to gain admission to an event, to solicit favors or to avoid enforcement of a law.

Employees also must not use their position on the staff in private business matters. Staff members should never verbally invoke their position with the newspaper, or use company stationery or email for such purposes.

Newsroom employees should not use Pilot news sources to obtain tickets to events or parking passes for personal use.

f. Family considerations
When relatives' activities might become newsworthy, employees are encouraged to make them aware of policies requiring us to avoid a conflict of interest or the appearance of one.

Employees must inform their supervisors of personal relationships that may conflict with their job responsibilities. This can also apply if the organization they work for were to become newsworthy.

Assigning editors shouldn’t contract with a relative or close friend to work directly for them as a freelancer without approval of a senior editor.

Staffers should not quote or photograph their own family members and those of other Virginian-Pilot employees for publication. If such a photo is taken and the familial connection is discovered after the fact, the photo or quotes should not be used unless absolutely necessary (e.g. the relative witnessed a car accident).

C. ONLINE PRESENCE
The most important thing newsroom staffers should remember: We represent The Virginian-Pilot at all times, no matter the platform, no matter the level of anonymity. We cannot divorce ourselves from that identity, and, as such, our conduct should reflect that.
Perception matters: Be mindful of how you share something online, and consider the scope of who will see it. We are journalists, no matter what part of the newsroom we work in, no matter where we post it.

In social media and other online venues, avoid taking one side or the other about controversial matters. Avoid offering opinions on controversial matters. However, sharing opinion content is acceptable. Offering analysis is acceptable. Sharing a link to a story and writing, for example, “an interesting perspective” is acceptable.

Do not pass on fake news and rumors through social media, even with a disclaimer.

6. Implementation and enforcement

a. New employees
Every new news and editorial employee will receive a copy of this policy when completing new-employee paperwork. Team leaders will review the policy with new employees to make sure that the policies are understood.

b. Current employees
It’s important for every newsroom employee to know the ethics policy and use it when making decisions. Each newsroom employee will annually attest in writing that he or she has read the ethics policy in the preceding 12 months.

c. Enforcement
Violations of the ethics policy may result in disciplinary action: reprimand, suspension or termination.

If you believe you may have inadvertently violated any of these guidelines, or a family member’s activities may have created a conflict or the appearance of conflict for you, notify your team leader as quickly as possible.

Any staff member who becomes aware of possible ethical violations by others is expected to bring it to the attention of a senior editor or editor.

d. Engaging the public
We will publish our code of ethics on our website and make it available to employees as a shared online file.