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What Citizens Should Expect from the Press

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What do we as citizens have a right to expect from journalists? Based on five years of research conducted from 1997 to 2002--what we believe is the most comprehensive and systematic effort ever by journalists to define the common principles of the profession--the following constitute a consensus about what journalists must offer and what citizens should expect.

Citizens' Bill of Journalism Rights

1. Truthfulness [1]
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1. We should expect, above all, truthfulness:

The integrity of the reporting should be obvious. The process of verification-how news people made their decisions and why-should be transparent in the work so we can judge the value and fairness of the information for ourselves. What elements would such a piece of reporting contain?

- Stories should make clear the sources of information, the basis of their knowledge, and why the information is believable and relevant. With anonymous sources, as much identifying information as possible should be given so readers can judge the source's reliability and potential biases.
 - The story's relevance should be clearly stated.
 - Important unanswered questions should be noted.
 - If the story raises a point of controversy we should expect follow up.
- Citizens, in turn, have an obligation to approach the news with an open mind and not just a desire that the news reinforce existing opinion.

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2. We should expect proof that the journalists' first loyalty is to citizens:

- This means stories should answer our needs as citizens, not just the interests of insiders, or the political or economic system.
- There should be a demonstrated effort to understand and reflect the whole community.
- We should see clear cases in which the news company will put its own financial interests at risk by providing information--through news, reviews, retail and consumer coverage--that could do it harm.
- We should expect news companies to disclose any synergy, connecting partnerships or conflicts of interest as they relate to a particular story. This includes reporting on a news organization's own lobbying efforts.

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3. We should expect journalists to maintain independence from those they cover:

It should be clear that commentators, columnists and journalists of opinion are serving the citizen debate rather than the narrow interests of a faction or a particular outcome.

- While journalists need not be neutral, we should expect they will not have divided loyalties. If journalists get too close to those they cover it only makes it more difficult for them to understand or convey all sides. Secretly counseling or writing speeches for sources is an example.
- Journalists' work should display evidence of independent thinking-- not always criticism of one side and praise of the other.
- We should see ample proof that these commentators have really examined the ideas of both those they agree and disagree with.

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4. We have the right to expect that journalists will monitor power and give voice to the voiceless:

- The press should use its watchdog power to uncover things that are important and new and that change community thinking. The news media should not squander this constitutional freedom on sideshow or pseudo scandals that research shows may build an audience.
 - The press should monitor all the key centers of power in the community-including but not limited to government.
 - We should see clear evidence that journalists have not simply become a tool of investigative agencies.
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5. We have a right to a forum for public criticism and problem solving:

- News providers should offer several channels for public interaction--be it letters, e-mail, phone contacts, or public forums--including mechanisms for readers and viewers to make story suggestions or raise criticisms.
 - News organizations also should give us access to a portion of their space or airtime so that we can converse in our own words with our fellow citizens.
 - Over time, we should expect to see a broad representation of views and values reflected in the news coverage--and not just those of the extreme positions that leave no room for compromise or problem solving.
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6. We have a right to expect news that is proportional and relevant:

- Journalists should be aware of our basic dilemma as citizens: that we have a need for timely and deep knowledge of important issues and trends--but we lack the time and means to access most of this crucial information.
- Thus journalists should use their special access to put the material they gather in a context that will engage our attention and also allow us to see trends and events in proportion to their true significance in our lives.
- News reports should not overstate the true nature of threats to our community such as crime and unusual weather.
- To provide a complete picture, we also should expect journalists to cover those aspects of community life that are functioning well. Our successes should be as apparent as our failures.
- Journalists should balance the public right to know with the personal right to privacy.

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Also see:

[A Statement of Concern](#)

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