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1.3 Standards of Ethical Journalism

Ethical Conduct

RFE/RL staff and contributors to programs and publications shall maintain the highest ethical standards in all conduct, taking particular care to avoid any conflict of interest, or the appearance thereof, in their relations with individuals, groups, political or commercial interests inside or outside the set of countries to which RFE/RL broadcasts (the "Broadcast Area"). RFE/RL staff and contributors shall in no way abuse their status as public figures or the good reputation of the Company to promote personal interest or gain. (See Policy 1.2 Code of Ethics/1.2.1 Conflict of Interest)

If RFE/RL journalists wish to use content from other media to enrich Company content, they must obtain permission from the holder of the copyright and make clear attribution to the specific source. No material should appear to be produced by RFE/RL if it is taken from another source. Whenever possible, providing links to the original source is recommended.

Professional Independence

The U.S. International Broadcasting Act of 1994, as amended, provides that "The Secretary of State [of the United States] and the Chief Executive Officer [of the Broadcasting Board of Governors], in carrying out their functions, shall respect the professional independence and integrity of the [BBG], its broadcasting services, and the grantees of the [BBG]." The law further states that RFE/RL journalism shall be "consistently reliable and authoritative, accurate, objective, and comprehensive" and "conducted in accordance with the highest professional standards of broadcast journalism."

RFE/RL employees must reject any pressure by representatives of any governments or any other outside entity to shape, alter or direct the Company's journalism. When faced with such a demand, employees should consult with the Editor in Chief or the Standards Editor as well as the General Counsel.

Violations and Disciplinary Action

The Journalistic Standards sets forth guidelines to which all staff employees and freelancers of RFE/RL's News Division are expected to adhere. Violation of the principles set forth in the guidelines may result in disciplinary action, up to and including termination of employment.

Standards are listed below in alphabetical order:

Accuracy	4
Anonymity and Pseudonyms.....	4
April Fools' Hoaxes	6
Attribution.....	6
Audience Comments.....	7
Audio Quotes.....	8
Audience Warnings for Disturbing Content	8
Avoidance of Advocacy	9
Awards from Outside RFE/RL.....	9
Balance and False Balance	10
Blogs	11
Branding	11
Cartoons, Memes, Drawings and Animation, Combo Photos, Collages	12
Children and Teens.....	15
Commentary.....	16
Corrections	18
Defamation.....	19
Difference Between Reporting, News Analysis, Commentary, Opinion, and Editorials.....	19
Ethnicity.....	20
Freelancers	20

Gender21

Hate Speech and Provocative Acts.....21

Images of Death22

Impartiality22

Interviews22

Investigative Reporting24

Leaked Information25

Live Streaming.....25

Music in Videos27

Naming Suspects In Criminal Cases.....28

Official Press Releases.....28

Outside Freelance Work.....29

Patriotism29

Payments to Obtain Interviews.....30

Photographs and Copyright31

Photo Captions32

Plagiarism33

Police Investigations and Trials33

Political Activity and Impartiality34

Public Exhibition of Captives During Conflicts35

Recording Phone Interviews36

Requests for Eyewitness Accounts, Images from Audience37

Requests for Pre-publication Approval37

Satire38

Smear Campaigns Against RFE/RL Journalists.....38

Social Media38

Stock Photos.....39

Suicide and Attempted Suicide39

Terrorism40

Tone of Moderation and Respect42

Two-Source Rule	43
Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence	45
Use of Hidden Cameras and Microphones	45
Use of UGC (User Generated Content)	46
Vox Pops	49

Accuracy

RFE/RL journalists and contributors should do their utmost to ensure that all broadcasts and publications (regardless of the medium) are factually accurate and verifiable. Where doubt or controversy may exist on significant points of fact, information must be based on at least two independent sources.

RFE/RL journalists and analysts should not broadcast or publish material that is based on rumor or unsubstantiated information.

Factual errors should be corrected as soon as possible.

Anonymity and Pseudonyms

Many RFE/RL language services serve as surrogate media in countries that severely curtail freedom of speech and punish or harass citizens who publicly make statements that offend state authorities. In order to bypass this censorship and provide an outlet for voices that otherwise would be suppressed, RFE/RL will under special circumstances protect a speaker's identity.

Sources in news stories:

Any use of information from anonymous sources must be brought before publication or broadcast to the attention of your Service Director or his/her designee or, in case of their absence, to your Regional Director. The Service or Regional Director will request the name of the source and make a final decision regarding whether the source is reliable, is in a sufficient position to know the information involved, and how much distance RFE/RL will put between it and the source in presenting the information to the public.

Anonymity is granted only to news sources whose identity must be protected due to a clear danger of retribution and whose information is not only of significant importance but otherwise unobtainable.

An exception to the requirement that there be a clear danger to the source is background briefings to journalists that are regularly given by government officials on condition of anonymity but whose identities are known to the journalists.

Providing a source with anonymity under any other circumstances than when there is a clear danger to the source must be avoided because it opens RFE/RL to charges it hides behind a curtain of anonymity and therefore lacks credibility.

When protecting confidential sources, we must mention that the source insists upon anonymity, state why, and describe to the extent possible how the source is in a position to be knowledgeable (for example, “an official who insists upon anonymity because he is not authorized to speak to the media but has directly participated in the negotiations”).

When we quote a source who insists upon anonymity, we should apply the same reporting standards we use with named sources. We must find out what *facts* the source bases his or her information upon. If the source cites no supporting facts or evidence (for example: a secret memo circulated among officials, a draft position paper being prepared, or an angry outburst at a cabinet meeting), then the source is providing a personal interpretation of events that may reflect his or her personal agenda. Rather than cite an anonymous source in such cases, a reporter can better interpret events himself by referring to information and statements in the public record.

RFE/RL journalists must be both cautious and sparing about granting confidentiality. Remember that our own bylined fact-based analysis is sufficiently authoritative (when it is demonstrably fact-based) that it does not need the support of anonymous sources (when their own fact-based evidence is not cited). Remember also that the objectivity of our own analysis risks being compromised when we cite an anonymous source who holds a position that raises the possibility that he/she could be promoting an agenda.

At times, RFE/RL broadcasts accounts of life by people who are living under repressive regimes and who cannot be safely identified, even though such stories would normally carry a byline. In such cases, no byline should be used. However, as full a description as is safely possible should be provided of the author, along with an explanation of the reasons for anonymity (for example, “the author is a Tatar woman living in Ukraine’s Russian-occupied Crimea who fears that identifying herself publicly would expose her or her family to official reprisals”). The story should focus on facts rather than the person’s political or social opinions.

We do not use pseudonyms to protect anonymous sources who relate compromising personal experiences. Instead, we protect their identity by referring to them as ‘he’ or ‘she’ or, for example, “the young addict” or “adolescent”, or in other ways that are appropriate. The audience should be made aware that we are hiding an individual’s identity and why.

Bylines and on-air names:

Special care should be taken regarding the use of pseudonyms or initials by RFE/RL broadcasters and paid freelancers.

Pseudonyms or “on-air names” should only be used when they are absolutely necessary to protect broadcasters or contributors from being identified by state bodies that would threaten them or their families because of their work.

The use of pseudonyms does not need to be specified by broadcasters when they are on the air, since stage names are not unusual in the broadcast industry.

However, pseudonyms should not be used when writing printed pieces – in this case it is better to use no byline or restrict the writing to staff members whose personal safety is not at risk.

The use of pseudonyms is not appropriate for writers of commentary. A cloak of anonymity risks weakening the credibility of the commentary by raising the possibility that the writer has a secret agenda he/she seeks to hide by not disclosing his/her identity.

Writers of blogs that offer a mix of news and commentary should not use pseudonyms for the same reason.

News analysis should be written under the writer's real name. When this is not possible due to security concerns, no byline should be used.

Pseudonyms should not be used for news reporting. The story can simply run without a byline.

April Fools' Hoaxes

RFE/RL does not create false stories for use as April Fools' hoaxes.

We also do not broadcast false stories created by other media as April Fools' hoaxes.

Attribution

We clearly identify the sources of the information in our reports.

We identify individuals who are the source of information by name and, on first reference, we give a clear indication of how the sources are in a position to know the information they provide. If they are affiliated with a specific institution, civic association, government ministry, etc. we note their affiliation and provide a general description of their role (for example: regional expert, analyst, activist, official). We do not cite hierarchical titles, such as "senior vice president for Eurasian studies at X Foundation" unless the individual's organizational position is directly relevant to the news story.

When we cite reports, studies, or surveys, we identify by name the source of the report. We also indicate the nature of the source (for example, government agency, private think-tank, social media site). If relevant, we also indicate whether the source is considered reliable by knowledgeable experts. If we cite a leaked report, we indicate the origin of the report and how it came to public attention (for example, "an Interior Ministry report leaked to the media by officials").

When we cite information reported by a news agency, we attribute the information to the agency by name on first reference in our report or, alternatively, we include the name of the agency in a list of sources at the bottom of our report. (See Two-Source Rule)

Audience Comments

RFE/RL provides audiences with the opportunity to leave comments in response to broadcast programs, web articles, and social media posts, or to respond in real-time to live television programs.

Editing of Comments

As a general rule, RFE/RL does not edit the content of the comments it receives. An exception may be made in cases where we invite our audience to contribute Viewer Voicemails as part of our programs.

In such cases, we reserve the right to broadcast or publish a concise statement excerpted from a lengthy or rambling comment. Doing so, we pay attention to focus upon the author's essential message. We restrict any editing within the selected statement to removing insignificant digressions or removing recorded pauses, 'ums' or other insignificant sounds.

Broadcasting and Publishing Comments

We do not broadcast or publish a comment if it violates our editorial standards prohibiting religious, ethnic, socio-economic, or cultural slurs, demeaning sexual remarks, or other forms of hate speech.

We do not broadcast or publish individual comments which contain false information or which are defamatory.

In choosing comments to broadcast or publish, we seek to present as wide a variety of opinions as possible.

We may decline to use comments that are repetitive or unfocused, or because we face space limitations.

We do not impose balance on a comments section by contributing comments ourselves or moving some comments higher in the ranking order to gain greater visibility.

If comments cease to be constructive or become entirely one-sided, including through the intervention of trolls, a comments section may be closed.

Social Media and Live Streaming

On social media, in live streaming, and in other situations that attract very high numbers of comments at a rapid rate, editors are encouraged to follow these guidelines to the extent staff resources permit.

Audio Quotes

Sound bites contain a fully formed thought as it was expressed by the speaker. We do not edit or alter what the speaker said. We do not remove sentences from an audio quote or splice two sentences together when they were not said together.

Pauses, "ums," and other insignificant moments may be edited out of an audio quote. But if the pauses are themselves revealing (for example, if a politician is asked a question and hesitates to answer) the pauses should be left in.

Care should be taken to transcribe every word of an audio quote. Exceptions can be made when someone repeats a phrase.

Audience Warnings for Disturbing Content

Fully reporting the news sometimes requires inclusion of images or audio that some members of our audience may find disturbing. On all platforms, we use viewer warnings to clearly identify such content so that audience members can decide in advance whether they want to expose themselves to it.

We use these audience warnings:

- WARNING: VIEWERS MAY FIND THE CONTENT OF THIS VIDEO DISTURBING
- *This report/program contains content that some listeners may find disturbing*
- *This article contains content that some readers may find disturbing*

The following kinds of content will *always* require the use of audience warnings. **(In case of doubt regarding these cases or any cases not mentioned below, consult with senior editors of your Service or with the Standards Office.)**

- Images of **corpses** after acts of war, immolation, torture, natural disaster, terrorist attacks, crimes, genocide, and accidents. ([See: Images of Death](#))
- Content that shows or describes **suicide** or attempted suicide ([See: Suicide and Attempted Suicide](#))
- Close-up images, sounds, or detailed descriptions of **extreme brutality** such as beating, stabbing, and shooting that can result in broken limbs, severe injuries, or endanger a person's life. This includes sexual violence, domestic violence, road accidents, physical assaults, street fighting, rioting, torture, police brutality, and authorities' suppression of protests. Wide-shots of violent scenes are permitted if they do not show details of extreme brutality.

- Images showing large amounts of **blood** from severe injuries; body fluids; vomiting; or medical procedures that shock or disgust viewers.
- Content showing graphic scenes of **animal abuse**. This includes sporting events involving animal fighting, whether or not the events are legal in the country involved.

Note that content that includes **severe verbal aggression**, including the use of obscene or humiliating language, discriminatory terms, and sexually offensive terms should be masked with bleeping.

Be aware that social media platforms may impose their own community standards (including age certification) for viewership of content that contains violence, nudity, images of drug abuse, etc. *For further information familiarize yourself with [YouTube Community Guideline](#) and [Facebook Community Standards](#).*

For additional information regarding when to use audience warning for disturbing content see: *Checks and Balances* blog post: [**When should we use audience warnings for disturbing content?**](#)

Avoidance of Advocacy

RFE/RL supports democracy and the human rights common to democratic states. However, RFE/RL journalists shall not advocate the adoption of specific policies or legislation, nor shall programming endorse or oppose candidates for elective or appointed office.

RFE/RL journalists must request permission from their Service Director before they sign petitions for social or political causes. Many such causes can have partisan leanings or can appear to support or oppose a specific group or movement.

RFE/RL supports the right of all peoples to self-determination. However, RFE/RL content shall not advocate or endorse separatist or secessionist causes.

RFE/RL supports freedom of travel and migration for all peoples in accordance with internationally recognized norms. However, RFE/RL content shall not incite the act of defection or encourage emigration.

Awards from Outside RFE/RL

RFE/RL employees, stringers, and freelancers may accept honorary and cash awards for their work done for RFE/RL when the awards are won in professionally judged competitions into which RFE/RL has formally entered the work.

If an award is won in a professionally judged competition into which a party other than RFE/RL has entered the work, a decision will be made by RFE/RL's editor-in-chief regarding acceptance on a case-by-case basis.

Note that unless an award is won in a professionally judged contest, an RFE/RL journalist may *not* accept any cash, goods, or services that accompany an award.

To avoid any perception of conflict of interest, RFE/RL reserves the right to refuse awards given *outside* of professionally judged competitions – for example, awards from multi-national bodies, governments, or NGOs. If journalists have been designated for such an award for work done for RFE/RL, they should immediately alert their Service Directors and a decision will be made by RFE/RL's editor-in-chief regarding acceptance or refusal on a case-by-case basis.

RFE/RL employees may not accept awards of any kind from political parties, political organizations, lobbyist groups, non-media industry groups, and companies.

When in doubt, consult with your Service Director.

Balance and False Balance

Balance:

RFE/RL seeks to be balanced in its reporting by informing our audience, through the totality of our programming, of the positions taken by all sides in a debate or conflict. That enables our audiences to reach their own informed conclusions regarding events and to make their own decisions about how to respond.

We try to reach all sides for comment, including top officials from authoritarian governments, in order to assure overall balance. If officials refuse to speak with us, we mention in our reporting the names of those we tried to reach and their refusal.

Balance does not mean neutrality regarding the truth. When one side in a debate misrepresents the facts, honest journalism requires pointing out the falsehood and stating what is factually correct. We quote what officials and other newsmakers say in order to represent accurately their positions, but we also identify misinformation and cite the facts that disprove it. If speakers are urging policies which could have dangerous or harmful consequences, we point out what those consequences could be.

We take particular care with government issued press statements. We do not simply relay them verbatim to our audience without ourselves fact-checking the veracity of the claims. If they contain inaccuracies or half-truths, we say so in our reporting of the statements.

At all times, we maintain a factual relationship with the truth.

False Balance:

There is a temptation in journalism to try to maintain balance by presenting all sides in an argument as equally credible. The temptation comes from an honest desire to avoid bias

in reporting but risks overlooking a journalist's duty to let the public know when factual evidence clearly supports one side more than another.

An example of false balance would be giving equal (50:50) weight and coverage time to scientists' warnings of global warming and laymen's arguments that global warming has yet to be proven. Honest reporting requires noting that the majority of scientific opinion

today accepts global warming as a proven fact and to only briefly note denials which are not evidence-based.

Balance does not mean creating false equivalencies whereby every position deserves receives equal time. When the factual evidence clearly supports one side more than another, we do not create a false balance between them.

Blogs

Blogs originated among internet users as a means of sharing an individual writer's views and interests with readers, often freely mixing facts with subjective personal opinions.

However, blogs used as a format for journalism are distinct from personal blogs and follow different standards in order to safeguard a news organization's credibility as a source of reliable information.

If an RFE/RL blog mixes news and commentary, it must alert readers to the fact that it does so. (If the title of the blog is "Chaikhana," for example, the blog should be subtitled "a mix of news and commentary about Central Asia"). The blog should be written by someone who doesn't primarily handle news reports and must include a disclaimer stating that "the views are the author's own and do not represent those of RFE/RL."

If a blog is purely a news blog, it should be identified as such. A live-blog about the Ukraine crisis, for example, should be subtitled "breaking news from Ukraine" and a disclaimer is not needed.

What should be remembered is that the word "blog" by itself refers only to a way to distribute information through a running series of entries. There are many different kinds of blogs and the purpose of any individual blog (whether to deliver pure news, pure commentary, or a mix of the two) must be made entirely clear to the reader.

Branding

RFE/RL has multiple products presented on multiple platforms and in multiple languages. To assure that we communicate our brand with a unified voice, we brand all our products (besides CURRENT TIME) with RFE/RL's torch symbol. Except in rare cases, the torch symbol is accompanied by a logotype spelling out the name of the organization in English or the name of a language service in its local language.

When sharing video products on 24/7 TV operations, only the logo of that TV operation should be used. The credit to the original authors of the product should be given at the end of the program.

In all other cases of sharing video products between services, use of logos is as follows:

- If the language markets of the two services overlap, the logo on the video will remain that of the service which created the video.
- If the language markets of the two services do not overlap, the service re-broadcasting the video will put its own logo on the video.

When sharing text news stories or features, proper credit should be given to the department or service from which the text item originated.

Placement of the torch and service name are standardized as part of the company branding guidelines and can be found here: <http://branding.rferl.org/>

Note that the primary brand mark (in English) should be used when representing the organization as a whole. However, individual language service brand marks should be used when representing a specific RFE/RL language service.

Use applicable RFE/RL brand identity standards when working online and when producing TV and radio programs and social media products. Branding templates are standardized on the web and on social media videos.

Branding is not just about sticking on a logo. Our brand reflects the identity of our organization and is created through consistent use of visuals, sound, and observance of professional journalistic standards in all our content and communication materials. Done correctly, branding builds credibility, instantly identifies us to an audience, and helps to distinguish our unique mission.

Cartoons, Memes, Drawings and Animation, Combo Photos, Collages

RFE/RL uses cartoons, drawings, and collages as forms of illustration. However, each format is distinct and is appropriate for some uses but not others.

Memes

We can report with context on memes that have gone viral, but we do **not** create memes ourselves.

Cartoons

Cartoons are used to provide outside points of view regarding social and political trends that are subjects of our news coverage.

They are never used as illustrations for news content and must be clearly distinguished from RFE/RL's own news content.

Cartoons are accepted or commissioned only from artists. If the artist is employed by RFE/RL, the artist will not do news reporting.

A cartoon must be signed with the name of its artist.

Cartoons must be grouped on a separate page of a Service's website in the form of a gallery. The page must have a rubric clearly identifying the content as cartoons and a disclaimer stating the cartoons do not represent the views of RFE/RL.

Over time, the cartoons that a service publishes should represent a wide array of topics.

Cartoons must not endorse a single candidate, party, or group in an election.

Cartoons must observe RFE/RL's policies on satire ([LINK TO SATIRE](#)) which prohibit religious, ethnic, socio-economic, or cultural slurs, demeaning sexual remarks, or other forms of hate speech.

Before publication, permission from the relevant language service director or regional director must be sought. Cartoons should reflect RFE/RL's values of fairness and good taste.

Drawings and Animation

Drawings and animation can be used as illustrations for certain kinds of news and feature articles when photographs or other images are not available.

Examples of appropriate uses include depictions of courtroom proceedings, domestic violence, human trafficking, historical events and other activities that are described by eyewitnesses or otherwise mentioned in a news article.

Drawings and animation should be clearly related in subject and content to the stories they accompany and must not express the personal opinions or emotions of the artist regarding the subject.

Drawings and animation used as illustrations must observe RFE/RL's standards of good taste. They must not present overtly violent, graphic, or sexual images.

Combo Photos

Combo photos combine two or more photographs into a single image so that two or more news makers or news events can be viewed side-by-side.

They are appropriate for use with all news formats. However, in all cases, it must be clear to the viewer that this is a composite image used for illustrative purposes.

The juxtaposed parts in a combo photo must be separated by a dividing line or white space.

When juxtaposing newsmakers, their portraits should be scaled to equal dimensions so that one does not appear more significant than the other.

The caption must take care not to suggest the newsmakers are in a shared meeting or that unrelated events are a single event. The caption should include the designation: composite image.

Collages

Collages are never used to illustrate news articles or live news blogs.

Collages may be used as cover art or as illustrations accompanying feature articles, investigative reports, talk shows, and blogs featuring commentary.

They also may be used as thumbnails for videos (news and features) published on social media platforms.

A collage is intended to creatively and accurately reflect the content of the product it accompanies. A collage must not:

- present images that go beyond the reality discussed or portrayed in the content;
- present the artist's personal opinions or emotions regarding the content or its subjects;
- incite hatred, be alarmist, or portray individuals through grotesque caricatures.
- contain religious, ethnic, socio-economic, or cultural slurs, demeaning sexual references, or other forms of hate speech.

Please also note these additional points regarding collages:

- It should be immediately apparent to the user that what they see is a collage. Collages should not give rise to possible impressions of an alternative reality or a photoshopped fake. (To make it clear that the different people shown in a collage are not in the same

place at the same time, you can place a white contour line around each individual, or you can place a white line between their photographs at the places where their photos adjoin.)

- Like every other material we produce, collages should reflect our identity as a responsible news organization. It is also important to avoid the appearance of a "yellow press" account or a collection of computer games covers

Beware that our contracts with agencies generally forbid the alteration of the photos. While cropping, using color correction and compiling in combo photos with proper attribution is permissible, alterations that create additional content or context might represent a copyright issue (SEE [PHOTOGRAPHS AND COPYRIGHT](#)). It's better to use photographs taken by RFE/RL journalists or commercially available stock images to produce collages.

Children and Teens

Stories about minors (generally defined as anyone under the age of 18) require special attention. We are ethically bound to help minors protect themselves from dangers they may not be aware of and, in some circumstances, we are legally bound to obtain permission from their parents or guardians before interviewing, photographing, or filming them.

Here are some guidelines we should always observe:

It is permissible to shoot first, so as to not miss an event, and seek written permission afterward from a parent or guardian afterward to use an image which clearly shows a child's face. We will not air or publish a photo in which a child is clearly identifiable unless we have written permission to do so, except as indicated below.

It is not necessary to obtain permission from a parent or guardian if the minor is part of a crowd engaged in an innocuous and commonplace activity, such as attending a public event. Similarly, it is not necessary to obtain parental permission if the minor is speaking or performing publicly.

It is not necessary to obtain permission to photograph or film children from the back, where their faces are not visible, or if the minor's face appears in the background of an image and is not easily identifiable.

It is not necessary to obtain parental or guardian permission to interview an older teen (15 to 18 years of age) on a non-controversial subject.

It is not necessary to obtain parental or guardian permission to use an image of a minor that appears in a photo which RFE/RL has licensed from another party such as a news photo agency (See Photographs and Copyright.)

Be aware that events at schools (whether the schools are private or publicly funded) are not public events and parental or guardian permission must be obtained in such cases. Generally, interviewing, photographing, or filming on school premises also requires the permission of the school authorities. An exception to this general rule is when we are

covering a breaking news story such as a fire at a school or a school shooting and there is no time to contact the children's parents or obtain permission from school authorities.

At all times, we should make reasonable efforts to protect the privacy of minors and their families. We should also be aware that the legal rights of minors vary from country to country. Unless it is necessary to the story, we should not publish details such as the precise name of a child's or teen's school, or the precise neighborhood or street where he or she lives. Be aware that adult predators can become fixated upon a child's image that appears in the media and seek to find the child.

Be aware that respect of a minor's right to privacy extends to social media. If a minor has posted material that could be harmful to him or her, we do not identify the minor, whether by his/her online name or real name. Similarly, if we contact a minor through social media and interview him or her via the internet, we still must obtain parental permission. The same rules we observe in the real world apply to the virtual world.

Stories about children that involve child-abuse, underage sex, child prostitution, rape, infection with the AIDS virus, and similar themes demand particular sensitivity to a minor's right to privacy. A minor may be willing to speak openly to a reporter without concealing his or her identity but we must remember that the minor may not be fully aware of the potential negative social consequences of doing so. In all such stories, we conceal the child's identity by blurring his or her face and using a pseudonym. (See Anonymity and Pseudonyms). We do so even when a parent or guardian gives permission to interview or photograph the child.

Images of children in sexually provocative poses are never used unless they are directly tied to the news value of the story. In such cases, we mask the child's identity and a supervisor's approval is required before publishing or broadcasting the image.

When in doubt about interviewing, photographing, or filming children and teens, or about what kind of information concerning them we can include in a written or video report, consult with a supervisor.

Commentary

The use of commentaries helps to ensure that RFE/RL audiences are presented with a diversity of views on important subjects. They are one of several forms of journalism we use. (See *Difference Between Reporting, News Analysis, Commentary, Opinion, and Editorials.*)

The decision whether to issue commentary on any subject is made by Service Directors, with the approval of their Regional Director.

Commentaries should be written by outside contributors, whose names and relevant affiliations to institutions or groups are clearly identified. Pseudonyms or initials are never used. (See *Anonymity and Pseudonyms.*)

On an exceptional basis, commentaries may be written by employees. However, employees, freelancers, or other contributors who primarily write and file news reports may not write commentaries.

Commentaries take sides in a debate but must always meet RFE/RL's professional standards of fact-based journalism. These standards include but are not limited to an honest representation of opposing views in a dispute, analytical deduction (as distinct from pure opinion), and the use of accurate information.

Note that some commentaries from outside contributors may present solely the author's point of view. This is permissible so long as a broadcast service also seeks out commentaries offering different points of view.

For all commentaries, the author must be identified by name and a disclaimer must be appended stating that the views expressed are those of the writer and do not represent the official position of RFE/RL.

Commentaries should never endorse a particular candidate, party, or group in an election or otherwise advance a personal agenda. They may not include incitements to violence, hate speech, personal insults, or false information.

If a blog freely mixes news with commentary, then the blog should be identified in a way that alerts readers to this (See Blogs.)

How To Write Commentaries

Remember that a commentary offers perspective on news events by interpreting them from a specific point of view, which is set forth by a writer using fact-based, logical argumentation. The writer takes sides in a debate but follows the rules of fact-based journalism. Commentaries are different from news analysis, which seeks to identify trends in news events and explain their larger causes or consequences without taking any side.

Commentary should be able to meet these tests:

- does it offer a fair and accurate representation of both sides of an argument?
- are the sources of information transparent?
- is the tone and message of the writing sober and not inflammatory?
- are the author's conclusions well-reasoned and not emotion-based?

If the commentary fails these tests, RFE/RL should not publish it.

Commentary, like all forms of honest news writing, should maintain a factual relationship with the truth. It should take note of all sides in a debate but point out falsehoods when they occur in one side's or the other's arguments. (If, for example, a party has made a statement without providing any factual evidence, that shortcoming should be noted.)

Misinformation from any source should be identified as such by citing the facts that disprove it.

Commentary should not be used as a vehicle to express a news organization's moral values. A news organization expresses its values through its daily choice of news issues to look into, its search for reliable and informed sources, and its insistence upon accuracy.

Thus, RFE/RL fulfills its mission (See RFE/RL'S Mission Statement) by setting an example of honest, accurate journalism, and by frequently selecting for coverage stories that address issues of freedom of expression, clean government, and the dangers of extremism. When a news organization wants to take a specific stand on an issue, it does so through a clearly marked editorial. RFE/RL does not carry editorials.

Corrections

RFE/RL is engaged in fact-based journalism. That means all efforts should be made to be accurate in reporting, to do careful fact-checking, and to catch potential errors before a story is published or broadcast.

However, if errors are made despite these safeguards, honest reporting requires immediately correcting the mistake and letting our audience know that we have done so.

RFE/RL staff are required to immediately alert supervisors as soon as a potential factual error in their work or the work of a colleague is recognized. The supervisor should then as quickly as possible double check with the reporter involved to confirm that an error has been made and to prepare a correction.

Any correction to a web article must be clearly evident to readers. The article on the web should be amended by correcting the factual error within the text and noting it with an asterisk. The asterisk should refer to a bottom-of-the-article line providing a full reason for the correction. The line should read, for example: **CORRECTION: This story has been corrected to correct Donald J. Trump's middle initial.*

We do not use euphemisms such as "clarification" or "change" or "fix" in place of "correction". Such euphemisms only confuse readers.

If an erroneous web article has been promoted on Twitter or other messaging platforms, a new post should be issued with a statement of why. The statement should read, for example: *A correction has been made, Here is the updated story with corrected name (link to correct story).*

If an error is detected during a live broadcast, the correct information should be given as soon as possible and preferably during the same newscast. If that is not possible, a corrected version should be broadcast in the next appropriate live segment.

Corrections to videos, graphics, and photos should be made as soon as possible after the error is detected, and a new version should be posted in place of the erroneous one.

In extreme cases, an error may conceivably require removing a story, video, photo, or other product from an RFE/RL platform so that it will not continue to misinform our audience during the time it takes to prepare a corrected version. However, the corrected form of the story should be issued as soon as possible afterward. If editors decide to retract the original story entirely, it should be replaced by a new story that addresses the same subject from a different angle and explains why the original story has been withdrawn.

Defamation

In most countries, laws against defamation give individuals who are the subjects of media coverage the legal right to sue for significant compensation if they feel they have been portrayed falsely and in a way that damages their public reputation or exposes them to public contempt.

How this applies to public figures, such as government officials, can vary widely from country to country. In some legal systems, public figures have the additional burden of proving that a report was published or broadcast with the knowledge it was false. In other countries, public criticism of key officials such as the head of state is illegal.

Note that the best protection against defamation suits is balanced and fact-based journalism. Truth can never be defamatory. Every piece we write or publish about an individual or company must be a self-contained unit with balance provided within itself; the balance cannot be provided through a link to another article on the assumption that our audience will see both reports.

All of our reports must be free of unattributed charges and hearsay. Any report containing claims of wrongdoing must be backed by evidence.

When in doubt about whether a specific story risks a defamation suit, you should consult with RFE/RL's General Counsel.

Difference Between Reporting, News Analysis, Commentary, Opinion, and Editorials

Reporting is the objective chronicling of events as they occur, or shortly afterwards, with the goal of presenting a truthful version of those events and the context in which they occur, including reactions to them.

News Analysis identifies trends in news events and explains their larger causes or consequences, which may not be apparent in daily reporting. News analysis does not take sides.

Commentary offers perspective on news events by interpreting them from a specific point of view, which is set forth by a writer using fact-based, logical argumentation. The writer takes sides in a debate but gives a fair representation of opposing positions. The tone avoids sarcasm, emotion, and hyperbole.

Opinion offers the personal, subjective and often emotion-based response of a writer to the news. It is *not* a format used by RFE/RL.

Editorials articulate the position that a news organization takes on a public issue or in response to news events of special importance. It is *not* a format used by RFE/RL.

Ethnicity

We avoid using ethnicity to identify individuals unless it is directly relevant to understanding a news event.

This pertains to reporting on both conflicts and criminal cases. The reason is to avoid fanning social tensions or reinforcing stereotypes in multi-ethnic societies where governments and other political players routinely play on ethnicity to divide and weaken communities.

Decisions on whether reporting on ethnicity is necessary for readers to understand a news event, including its context and background, will be made on a case-by-case basis by Service Directors.

It is *not* relevant to report ethnicity in most cases of individual crimes, for example, where a migrant worker commits a robbery. The individual's motives are likely to be personal and, unless known to be otherwise, should not be confused with his or her ethnic identity.

It *may be* relevant to report ethnicity in cases of group actions, for example, where ordinary members of one community or state clash with ordinary members of another. The motives for the group action, unless known to be otherwise, may lie in communal tensions.

Freelancers

RFE/RL staff members should do their utmost to ensure that non-employee contributors abide by this Standard and the other provisions of Section 1 – General Policies. Violations of these ethical and professional standards may lead to termination of a freelance or civil contract with the Company.

Gender

When possible, we use gender-neutral terms: police or police officers, not policemen; force of 500 soldiers, not force of 500 men; businesspeople, etc. References such as “businesswoman” or “policeman” are acceptable when used in the singular.

We try to avoid always using “he, him his” as generic terms when either a man or a woman may be the subject.

Hate Speech and Provocative Acts

We are very careful in how we cover hate speech and provocative acts that are intended to offend individuals or communities based upon their identity or values. We recognize that provocateurs seek to use the media in their efforts to divide populations along ethnic, religious, or cultural lines. We also recognize that such activities can result in individual or communal violence with fatal consequences.

We consider hate speech to include slurs based upon religion, race, ethnicity, national origin, culture, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability, as well as other forms of offensive references that are intended to set one group against another. We are mindful that hate speech can take a variety of forms, from crude insults and slogans to well-disguised references hidden in what appears to be balanced political discourse.

Depending upon the inflammatory nature of specific remarks, we reserve the right not to quote hate speech verbatim in our news coverage, whether the speaker is a political leader or an ordinary citizen. Instead we may choose to use indirect quotes and description that avoids quoting the hate speech verbatim but still provides a clear report of the speaker’s statements. When in doubt, consult with your Service Director.

We will under *no circumstances* directly broadcast speakers’ calls for violence or revenge, no matter who makes them. We report such calls through indirect quotes instead.

As a rule, we not broadcast provocative acts staged by individuals or groups to incite hatred or violence. A staged cross-burning or desecration of the Koran are examples.

However, we may make editorial decisions to report on individual cases depending upon their news importance. Those decisions are made by service directors in consultation with regional directors as necessary.

We will report on reactions to provocations. However, in reporting on reactions we remain careful not to feed a conflict by directly quoting hate speech from either side.

We reserve the right to use bleeping, blurring, and editing to prevent the inadvertent dissemination of hate speech, provocative acts, or displays of provocative symbols that might occur during field reports or live programs.

We do not link to websites that engage in hate speech or promote violence.

Images of Death

We recognize that images of death are integral to conveying the facts and emotions of some news events.

However, we observe the following guidelines to protect the dignity and privacy of victims and their families as well as the reasonable sensitivities of our audience.

- We may show corpses. However, if the faces are easily identifiable, we will mask the faces or blur them sufficiently to conceal the features.
- We will not show close-ups of a dead person's face, no matter how peaceful the expression.
- We will not show the moment of death.
- We will not show overtly gruesome images of bodies and body parts.

These guidelines pertain to both adults and children and whether or not a close relative encourages or otherwise gives permission to journalists to take the picture.

These guidelines apply to images of wars, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, crimes, executions, suicides, and all other circumstances. (*SEE Suicide and Attempted Suicide*)
<https://libertynet.rferl.org/a/17295.html>

In cases where an image is so iconic that the image itself is the subject of the news or is otherwise extraordinarily noteworthy, we may consider special exceptions on a case-by-case basis. Service Directors should decide each case in consultation with a Regional Director.

Impartiality

Information will be presented in a factual context that enhances understanding of the events and issues and provides clarity without distortion or bias.

RFE/RL shall be independent from any political party, opposition group, emigre organization, commercial or other special-interest organization, or religious body, whether inside or outside the Broadcast Area.

Interviews

RFE/RL frequently interviews political leaders, experts, and concerned citizens to provide our audience with a comprehensive picture of news events and social issues.

The intent of all interviews, as with all our journalism, is to provide information to our audience in a way that allows for the audience to make up its own mind regarding what to think about what it hears.

It is therefore incumbent on interviewers to ensure that all interviews meet the following standards of fact-based and balanced journalism:

Interviewees may present their personal views of events and issues. However, all claims must be supported by factual evidence and the source of factual evidence must be transparent. The interviewer's role is to challenge the interviewee to provide such evidence, whether the interviewee is a news maker, an analyst, a witness of an event, or any other kind of source.

Interviewers will challenge claims based purely on subjective feelings, appeals to the audience's emotions, or imaginary scenarios. The interviewer's role is to challenge subjective claims, point out their subjective nature to the audience, and challenge the interviewee to substantiate them with factual evidence.

Interviewers will challenge erroneous information, including factual errors, false information, and fake news. It is the interviewer's responsibility during the interview to immediately challenge and correct erroneous information provided by an interviewee. If the erroneous information is not corrected during the interview, the interview should be packaged in a way that the erroneous information is clearly identified and corrected. If this is not possible, the interview should not be published or broadcast.

Interviewees are not permitted to engage in hate speech, incite violence, or make factually unsubstantiated alarmist predictions. We will only interview a figure who is prone to use such language if it is a figure of significant news value and we will *never* interview such figures live. The interviewer will warn the interviewee that hate speech and other forms of inflammatory speech will be edited out of the interview before it is broadcast or published.

If during a taped interview, the interviewee accuses someone of a criminal activity, and that accusation has not made previously by the police or by a court, we consider the accusation to be extra-judicial and potentially defamatory, and we therefore inform the interviewee that it will be removed from the interview before publication or broadcast. If an extra-judicial charge is made by an interviewee during a live interview, it is the interviewer's responsibility to immediately inform the audience that the charge is not official and to state the accused person's position (if it is known) regarding this or similar accusations.

If an interview concerns a controversial issue, the interviewee should provide a fair representation of the positions of both sides of the dispute. If the interviewee fails to do this, it is incumbent on the interviewer to do so by clearly stating the missing side's contrary point of view and challenging the interviewee to address it.

In depth, single-person interviews are accorded only to significant newsmakers, prominent personalities, experts with extensive factual knowledge of a subject, and exclusive witnesses to important news events.

The tone of an interview should be moderate, reasonable, and allow for constructive discussion. The interviewer is responsible for setting a moderate tone and maintaining it, reminding interviewees as necessary to keep their statements concise and, in the case of multiple interviewees, ensuring that all voices are heard.

Finally, interviewers may seek to prompt interviewees to reach conclusions during or at the end of an interview. However, interviewers must refrain from trying to draw or state conclusions themselves. Similarly, headlines, intros and outros for interviews must not go beyond what an interviewee states during the interview.

Investigative Reporting

We do investigative reporting in the public interest. All investigative reporting is done by reporters working in close cooperation with their service directors, who should obtain advice as necessary from a regional director and RFE/RL's legal counsel.

We identify ourselves as RFE/RL reporters and look for ways to get information in legitimate ways. We seek the voluntary cooperation of sources and do not use subterfuge to obtain interviews, for example, by tricking a source into opening the door to his home. Instead, we would seek to interview the source in a public space as he leaves or returns home.

We do not break the law by purchasing something illegal as part of our investigative reporting.

We do not use surrogates. If an NGO which is investigating corruption sends a person undercover and then shares its findings with us, we may publish or broadcast that person's account. However, we do not instigate undercover reporting by the NGO; provide equipment, advice or financing for it; or in any other way become a party to the NGO's undercover operation.

We may, in cases of high public interest, follow a "don't tell if not asked policy" regarding our identity as journalists, allowing people to assume we are ordinary citizens. An example would be taking the role of a citizen seeking a driver's permit in order to learn if bribes are being demanded by inspectors. If asked directly whether we are journalists, we would reveal our identity and the purpose of our reporting.

We offer anonymity to a source in an investigation only if it is absolutely necessary to protect his safety (See Anonymity). In granting anonymity, we still make it transparent to our readers how our source is in a position to know what he reveals and why his information is reliable.

We follow RFE/RL's guidelines on the use of concealed cameras and recorders (See Use of Hidden Cameras).

No RFE/RL investigative report should be published or broadcast without vetting and approval by the relevant service director, with advice from RFE/RL's legal counsel if necessary.

Be aware that any exceptions to all the principles enumerated in this section need to be approved by the editor-in-chief.

Leaked Information

If you receive material that is leaked to you by a source in connection with your work for RFE/RL, you must take the following steps before using it your reporting.

- In cases where the material could put you at risk of retribution if third parties learn it has been leaked to you, you must immediately contact the Editor-in-Chief so that RFE/RL can prepare a company-level response to the potential danger. The Editor-in-Chief will consult with the Director of Corporate Security.
- In cases where possession of the material does not put you at risk, you must inform your Service Director that you have the material and consult with him or her before using it for publication or broadcast. The Service Director will request the name of the source and make a final decision regarding whether the source is reliable, is in a sufficient position to know the information involved, and how much distance RFE/RL will put between itself and the source in presenting the information to the public.

Live Streaming

When live streaming from the site of rallies, protests, and other events, we must pay close attention to the danger of inadvertently broadcasting political agendas, hate speech, incitements to violence, images of extreme violence, or excessive use of profanity (*SEE Hate Speech and Provocative Acts*).

Remember: We do not want our editorial control to be effectively hijacked by the organizers of an event through simply streaming it live.

Therefore, before considering live streaming, ask yourself whether the event merits live streaming or if your audience would be better served by reporting (news package).

Also, ask yourself if you have sufficient resources available to maintain editorial control throughout the live streaming. Maintaining editorial control requires taking these precautions:

- a producer must closely monitor the live stream throughout its duration.
- a reporter always must be on the scene to provide real-time context and background to the live-streamed event. An exception can be made only if the real-time context and background are provided from the studio.
- our correspondents at the scene must be clearly identified as RFE/RL reporters, so that the speakers at the event are not mistaken for RFE/RL staff.
- If an event becomes so spontaneous or chaotic that it becomes impossible for a reporter to identify in real time who is speaking, consideration should be given to terminating the live stream and continuing coverage through reporting (news package) instead.
- If the transmission quality of the live streaming deteriorates for technical reasons, a decision should be made whether to terminate the event and to continue coverage through reporting (news package) instead.
- If a reporter/producer/editor sees that the live streaming of an event is inciting participants to play to our cameras or participants are making calls for violence, the live streaming should be stopped.
- We should not feel any obligation to live stream an event or protest from beginning to end, especially if our audience would be well served by deeper reporting obtained by non-live coverage of the event.

In rare exceptions, when it is impossible to cover a breaking story otherwise and where the reporter is already on the scene, it can be acceptable for a reporter to use a smart phone to go live direct to social media. However, before doing so, the reporter must obtain permission from editorial supervisors.

If a rally includes displays of hate symbols or posters with bigoted, obscene, or defamatory slogans, we should show these objects on camera only the minimum amount needed to

convey the mood of the event. Avoid showcasing hate symbols and messages by focusing cameras closely or at length upon them.

A reporter should be prepared to correct false claims made by interviewees. The correction should be made as part of the reporter's commentary as soon as possible after the false claim is made.

While live streaming a protest, our reporting must make clear that those present represent only one perspective. We must also provide a fair representation of opposing perspectives (if possible, by speaking to someone from the opposing side).

While live streaming a protest, our reporting must honestly represent the scene. If a crowd is small, we reflect that in our images – we do not fill the screen with people simply to make an image more aesthetic.

If we invite real-time audience interaction via social media, an editor must stand ready to immediately delete comments that contain hate speech, calls for violence, or excessive profanity. If the quantity of such comments becomes overwhelming, we should close the comment section.

Music in Videos

Video producers sometimes assume that all videos should be accompanied by a soundtrack of music and are incomplete without one.

However, the most accurate and objective presentation of an event is often achieved by simply using natural sound. That is because any music soundtrack you choose for a video may contribute its own editorial message.

Consider these examples:

A public official opens a new playground for children in an impoverished neighborhood and the producer chooses happy music. However, be aware that the music could appear to make the public official appear genuinely public spirited even as critics charge he has profited from the project through corruption. In this case, the happy music risks hiding one side of the story.

A politician makes a speech in which he angrily threatens his opponents and the producer selects menacing music to underscore the tone of the remarks. However, be aware that

the menacing music risks adding an element of bias to the report by suggesting the politician is evil and his opponents are not.

In these and other examples of controversial subjects, note they are often best handled by using ambient sound and narration to safeguard the objectivity of the report.

When subjects are not controversial and they generate universal emotions of joy or sorrow, music that complements the images may help to deepen the report's emotional impact. An example would be choosing cheerful music to reflect the happiness of a crippled child who regains mobility through the gift of an artificial limb.

Be particularly careful with patriotic events, such as military parades and national anniversary celebrations, and with protests. To maintain RFE/RL's reputation for balance, use *only* ambient sound. Under no circumstances should we add patriotic or other musical soundtracks of our own – doing so risks creating the impression that we are editorializing the proceedings rather than reporting on them.

Naming Suspects In Criminal Cases

Adults

We do not name suspects in criminal cases or show their photographs unless the police or a court officially announces to the public that the person has been charged with a crime or that an investigation has been opened.

A name received from a source in the judiciary or from someone who heard the name spoken in a closed-door court hearing is not an announcement by the police or court to the media or public.

In cases where political opponents of a regime are being charged with criminal activity or administrative offenses, we should make clear the background of the case and the possible political motives behind it.

Minors

We do not name minors or show their photographs in our reports *even if* they are named publicly by the police or a court. RFE/RL defines as a minor anyone under the age of 18.

The only exceptions are in the cases where a minor has been publicly charged by police or a court with committing a crime that involves victims of extraordinary public interest. In such cases, Service Directors will judge on a case-by-case basis whether the news importance of the event outweighs our respect for the privacy of a minor.

Official Press Releases

Governments, political groups, non-governmental organizations, companies, and many other parties regularly put out news releases, videos, and announcements they hope will be disseminated by the media.

In the interest of objectivity and balance we never simply repost or broadcast this material “as is”, either in entirety or in part.

However, we will use official news releases as reference material if they contain announcements or other information of genuine news value. We will include such information in a news story which we write and which uses our own reporting to add necessary context, balance, and background.

Be aware that claims made in official news releases must be subject to the same fact checking we do with any other news source. If a statement in an official news release is incorrect, we point this out to our audience, noting the correct information and the source of it.

We clearly credit statements made in official news releases to their source, for example, “as announced by the Russian Foreign Ministry”.

We exercise caution with “handout images” – be they photos or video – which non-media organizations provide of events. We should use such handouts only if no images from our own or other news agencies are available and only if the image is essential to our coverage of the story.

Be aware of the possibility that the images may have been altered for the provider’s own purposes; use common sense and do visual inspection for any possible signs of manipulation. If we feel the image has not been manipulated and decide to use it, we clearly identify its source. If the event was closed to the media, we make that clear in our report and, in the case of a handout photo, in the photograph’s caption.

Outside Freelance Work

RFE/RL News Division employees are required to obtain permission from their Service Director for any outside freelance work, paid or unpaid, in order to safeguard against possible conflicts of interest. Such work includes, but is not limited to, publishing an article, publishing or translating a book, blogging, and production of videos. It also includes work for any government, including the U.S. government, and any private company or organization, profit or non-profit.

We do not engage in freelance work for organizations which RFE/RL currently covers or might cover in the future, or that could present a conflict of interest in any other way. Decisions regarding possible conflicts of interest are made by the Service Director in consultation with a Regional Director as necessary.

RFE/RL staff journalists may not work as a freelancer for any other media organization without permission from their Service Director. If a staff journalist does freelance work regularly for an outside media outlet, each case of publication or video production must be pre-approved by the Service Director.

To protect RFE/RL’s reputation for balance and objectivity, work done on a freelance basis must not express political opinions, support causes, or send messages that in any way undermine our audience’s trust in the journalist’s impartiality.

RFE/RL reserves the right to revoke any permission previously given for any freelance outside work.

Patriotism

Some journalists come to work at RFE/RL out of a strong sense of patriotic duty to their country and a strong belief in the values of democracy, free speech and human rights. In

championing these values, they may be in opposition to authoritarian governments and/or authoritarian political parties and feel a personal stake in the political contests being waged in their home countries.

This can raise challenges of how to reconcile one's feelings of patriotism and personal political convictions with RFE/RL's mission to provide information which is objective and comprehensive, as well as consistently reliable, authoritative, and accurate.

There is a simple guideline to follow: We are here to serve our audiences by providing them the full range of information they need to make their own decisions. We are not here to impose our personal political views about what decisions should be made.

Personal feelings of patriotism or ethnic or religious identity are particularly tested in times of crisis, especially during wars between countries or armed conflicts within countries. In such cases, journalists working in the language services directly involved in the crisis may feel strong temptations to manage the news due to fears that informing their publics of some events (such as mass killings, rapes, torture of victims) could fuel further cycles of revenge-fueled violence. However, the job of journalists is to provide, not block access to, all the information the public needs to fully understand the extent of a problem and find solutions. Events should be reported as they occur, with full attention to our professional standards for balance (See [Balance and False Balance](#)). Language services must not broadcast or publish direct quotes from any source which contain calls for violence.

Feelings of patriotism should never get in the way of honest reporting on one's own country's relationship to other countries and peoples. RFE/RL journalists should not accept historical narratives or nationalist values simply because they are widely held by their countrymen if such narratives or values are factually wrong. Objectivity and accuracy require challenging false patriotic narratives and their premises and reporting the truth as it is. In case of doubt about specific events or subjects, refer to a Regional Director for guidance.

Payments to Obtain Interviews

RFE/RL does not offer payments to sources in order to obtain interviews. Nor do we grant requests from interviewees for payment. This ban applies to all types of payments, whether cash or in-kind.

Paying for interviews seriously undermines the credibility of any information received. It raises the very real likelihood that a source will tailor the information to what he or she thinks the reporter wants to hear.

Any exceptions to this policy must be approved by the Editor-in-Chief or by a Regional Director.

This guideline does not apply to payments by RFE/RL to regular contributors to our programs who are contracted to provide a product exclusively for RFE/RL's use.

Photographs and Copyright

In the area of intellectual property law, photographs present the greatest risk to media companies such as RFE/RL. It is therefore essential to remember the following general rule: unless a photograph was taken on assignment for RFE/RL or has been licensed from an agency with which RFE/RL has a contract, RFE/RL cannot publish it without written permission from the owner. (There are some small exceptions to this general rule, which will be discussed below.) That means close attention must be paid to the source of any photo we wish to use.

Each photo published by RFE/RL must be credited to its owner. If the owner does not want his/her name credited, the photo should be forwarded to RFE/RL's Photo Library Photos@RFE/RL.org, which will publish it as "Contributed to RFE/RL".

A photo can be used if its age or source makes it highly likely that it has no copyright protection. Such photos are extremely old photos and photos from certain government websites. Check with the Photo Library at Photos@RFE/RL.org to confirm if a photo meets these conditions.

If a situation arises in which the only available photograph of someone comes from her Facebook (or other social network) account, do not use it until consulting with RFE/RL's General Counsel.

A photo can be used under "fair use" provisions only if the photo itself has become a news story and RFE/RL adds substantial commentary of its own about the photograph. Never assume that because a photo is "everywhere" on the internet it means you can use it, too. The owner of any photo on social media is the person who took the photo, or the person who later bought the rights from the photographer. Using a photo and marking it "social media" does not protect RFE/RL from potential copyright suits.

RFE/RL Pangea database as a source of photos

RFE/RL's in-house photo database is a rich source of photos related to a vast array of subjects. However, over the years, the database has accumulated hundreds of photos that have been uploaded by correspondents and editors who may not have obtained written permission from the owner. Therefore, do not use photos credited as "Courtesy Photo" or "Social Media" on Pangea unless the accompanying information for that photo clearly indicates that RFE/RL has permission to publish it. When in doubt, check with the Photo Library at Photos@RFE/RL.org.

Remember that when adding new photos to the Pangea database, we must credit the images by name to their owners who provided them to us, not to a vague source like "Social Network" or "Twitter."

Altering photos

Our contracts with agencies generally forbid alteration of a photo; however, some agencies allow us to perform cropping and color correction. If you have any questions about which alterations a given agency permits, contact Photos@RFE/RL.org.

It is permissible to combine two different photographs into one image (for example, two world leaders meeting at a summit) but be sure that the combined image is credited properly. When in doubt check with the Photo Library at Photos@RFE/RL.org about how such combined images should be credited.

We should remember that altering photos is not only a legal but an ethical issue. Alterations beyond cropping and color correction risk changing the content of a photo and thus falsifying the reality they depict. Similarly, we should never slide two photos together in a way that creates the impression they are part of a single photo (for example, two photographs of world leaders placed side-by-side so that their extended hands appear to be “reaching out” to each other).

Liabilities

Failure to adhere to these guidelines can lead to significant financial penalties for the company and disciplinary action against the employee responsible.

Photo Captions

News photos must always be accompanied by a caption providing a short description of the news event depicted. The caption should mention (to the extent possible) what happened, where it happened, and when it happened and identify by name the people involved.

When naming people depicted in a photograph, we use indicators in parentheses such as (left), (center), (right), (left to right), (second from left), etc.

Try to anticipate what keywords the audience might use when searching the internet for information about the news your photograph illustrates. Include some of these keywords in your caption; this will increase the visibility of your news story on the web.

Photos from commercial agencies with which RFE/RL has a contract must have a photo credit on the image identifying the agency by name (example: Reuters).

When using archive photos, pay attention to finding the most recent photo of the subject that is available in the archive. Also, take care not to repeatedly use the same photo to illustrate the subject unless absolutely no alternative photos exist.

Generic or stock photos used as illustrations for a story do not require a caption.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is illegal and unethical. It can damage RFE/RL's reputation and lead to costly lawsuits.

When RFE/RL has a contract with a news agency to republish or rebroadcast its material, it is acceptable to use its material verbatim and credit the agency. However, we prefer to reword the material, credit it, and interweave it with our own reporting whenever possible.

When using material from a news agency or any other source with which we do not have a license agreement that allows us to use their material, we quote the material (either directly or indirectly) and identify the agency or other source by name. However, we refrain from directly quoting them too extensively or frequently in order to protect ourselves from copyright violation claims.

Police Investigations and Trials

RFE/RL broadcasts to many countries with authoritarian systems and opaque judicial proceedings. We exercise special care in reporting on police investigations and trials of criminal suspects when they take place under such conditions.

We operate under the legal principle that all accused persons have the right to a fair trial and are presumed innocent until proven guilty.

As a rule, we do not re-broadcast public confessions of guilt that may be aired by state media ahead of criminal trials. However, in cases involving political or other well-known figures, we may broadcast a pre-trial confession as part of our news reporting. We will note that it is impossible to know under what conditions the confession was obtained and whether it was forced or voluntary.

As a rule, we do not re-broadcast videos of pre-trial line-ups of people the police say were caught committing crimes or are members of criminal groups. We may report that authorities presented a line-up of suspects to the media and use a photograph as illustration but we refer to those in the line-up as suspects and mask or blur their faces sufficiently to conceal their identities. However, in cases involving political or other well-known figures, we may broadcast their pre-trial exhibition as part of our news coverage and not conceal their identities.

We are particularly sensitive to the fact that authoritarian regimes often use charges such as financial corruption or drug possession not only to imprison political opponents but also to discredit them with the public. In reporting on criminal cases involving political activists, we mention potential political motivations when they are relevant.

In reporting on investigations and trials in an authoritarian state, we provide our audience with relevant information regarding the degree of transparency and fairness of that state's legal system. We cite criticisms by reputable human rights groups and governments of the legal system in general and of a specific investigation or trial in particular.

Political Activity and Impartiality

Be aware that many people regard you as a representative of RFE/RL and will form opinions about RFE/RL's balance and objectivity from your statements and actions. You must therefore take care in your private and professional activities not to do anything that might put your own or RFE/RL's impartiality in question.

VOTING AND PUBLIC OFFICE

RFE/RL employees have the right as private citizens to vote in elections and to take part in civic and religious activities.

Within RFE/RL's coverage area, all RFE/RL employees who are directly involved in the practice of the Company's journalism (including, but not limited to, broadcasters, producers, reporters, editors, analysts, broadcasters, Service Directors and Regional Directors) may not join or work for political parties, donate to political campaigns, or run for, be appointed to, or serve in any public office.

Outside RFE/RL's coverage area, all RFE/RL employees who are directly involved in the practice of the Company's journalism should be sensitive to the possibility that being involved in political activity might lead to a conflict of interest that raises questions about RFE/RL's reputation for objectivity. Journalists must at all times assure that any political activity will not compromise their observance of RFE/RL's editorial standards of objectivity, fairness and balance in their work.

POLITICAL CAUSES

We do not perform paid or unpaid work for parties promoting a political cause, for lobbying organizations, or for governmental agencies of any nation (except the USAGM).

We may join and make donations to professional organizations and NGOs. But we will not serve as officers of the organizations, sit on their boards, or do paid or unpaid organizational work for them, or engage in any activities that set a public example to others to support their causes.

We do not publicly espouse political views, sign political petitions, or participate in political demonstrations. Exceptions may be considered in the case of public actions in support of freedom of the press and of professional journalists who are persecuted or imprisoned. Decisions regarding exceptions will be made on a case-by-case basis by the Editor in Chief.

RFE/RL journalists may cover public demonstrations on reporting assignment or observe protests as private citizens to obtain knowledge of news events.

Public Exhibition of Captives During Conflicts

All decisions regarding use of credibly sourced and vetted POW videos must be made on a case-by-case basis, using the following guidance as a north star, and must involve the approval of an editor.

The 1949 Geneva Conventions call for POWs to be treated humanely. This includes protection from acts of violence, intimidation, or being coerced to provide information. Journalists are not bound by international humanitarian law. However, it is their ethical obligation to avoid publishing material that treats captives as objects of “public curiosity,” humiliates them, or puts them at risk.

1. RFE/RL’s basic position is: avoid POW photos, videos, and audio.

2. Exceptions may be made only when it can be clearly justified that such content is in the public interest because it offers significant news value. (In the current war in Ukraine, it can be argued that some footage of Russian POWs is in the public interest because of the lack of credible information from the Russian government about troop deployment and casualties.)

3. If such a justification exists, steps must then be taken to minimize personal details about the POW in question and only show what is strictly necessary for the purpose of the report. Those steps can include:
 - Blurring the face of the POW

 - Eliminating audio that includes the POW’s surname or other telltale identifiers

 - Avoiding any content that shows the POW to be in evident distress

 - Avoiding any content in which the POW accuses superiors or government officials of wrongdoing. Such footage could later be used against soldiers after their return home.

 - If we broadcast videos or photos of captives making public confessions, we will state clearly that it is impossible to know whether the confession was voluntary or obtained by force.

4. Special Cases:

- Using POW footage in a call for information – If a journalist wants to use POW footage in an attempt to find out more about the prisoner’s background, it is possible to use a still image or screenshot and show that to the audience with a call for information. (This can be useful in tracking down family members or other acquaintances who may in turn be able to provide useful information about the nature of the soldier’s deployment. In the Ukraine war, for example, some family members of Russian POWs have testified that the soldier in question had received very little training or believed they were being sent for training exercises only.)
- Interviews with relatives – If a relative of a POW agrees to speak to a journalist about the POW, there is a justified news need for running short, unblurred video of the POW in captivity as part of our report. Such interviews may be the result of a call for information by the journalist, or at the initiative of relatives who themselves contact RFE/RL to highlight the plight of their family member.
- Extraordinary News Value – If a POW video contains news of exceptional significance – for example, proof that foreign mercenaries are fighting in a national army, or visible injuries the POW claims were inflicted by a superior – we may show an unblurred video as part of the news story.

Recording Phone Interviews

If you are conducting a newsgathering interview by phone with the intention of using audio quotes on air, you must observe the following rules:

- Identify yourself, the fact that you are reporting for RFE/RL, and the Service you work for.
- State the purpose of your call and that you would like to ask some questions for use on air.
- If the person agrees, tell them when you are starting to record.

Exceptions may be made when an anticipated refusal to provide information is part of a story. In such cases, you only need to state you are calling from RFE/RL and the purpose of your call. Consent is not needed to record or air the reply. (Example: recording a refusal to comment or a reply that someone is not available to comment.)

Exceptions also may be made during investigative reporting when telephoning to an office to obtain information that would be provided to any ordinary member of the public. In such cases, it is not necessary to identify yourself as a journalist or receive permission to record. (Example: recording a reply about opening hours or licensing fees.) (SEE: *INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING*)

Note that laws regarding the recording of phone calls can vary from country to country. If in doubt about local laws, consult with your service director.

Requests for Eyewitness Accounts, Images from Audience

RFE/RL often includes in its reporting eyewitness accounts, photos, and videos from citizens who are present at news events such as natural disasters, civil unrest, and terrorist attacks.

However, we must observe certain conditions when inviting user-generated content:

A top priority is to remind people contributing from the scene of an accident, natural disaster, or civil unrest not to put themselves at risk of harm or to hinder the work of rescue organizations. A message to this effect should always be prominently included in any call for eyewitness input that we broadcast or place on our webpages.

We also should not put anybody at risk to interview them if they are in a vulnerable situation (for example, hiding during a terrorist attack).

Any input received must be carefully checked to ensure that it is authentic and that the sender is not passing on hearsay or falsified images. This should be done by cross-checking the content against the accounts of other eyewitnesses or reporters who are known to be, or to have been, on the scene and by questioning the sender closely about his or her precise whereabouts and activities.

If an audience member submits a photograph or video, editors should take reasonable steps to confirm that the sender really did take the photograph and therefore has the right to authorize RFE/RL to publish it. (See Photographs and Copyright.)

Requests for Pre-publication Approval

RFE/RL does not agree to requests to review our reports before publication or broadcast, whether those requests come from sources we have interviewed or any other party.

We also do not offer an opportunity for pre-publication approval as an incentive for granting an interview.

To confirm that we have accurately quoted a source directly or indirectly, we may decide upon our own initiative to check relevant material with the source in advance of publication or broadcast. However, in such cases, we will refuse any requests from sources or their organizational superiors to make amendments that would significantly alter the original meaning or intention of what was said.

We will not agree to a request to submit questions in advance to an interviewee. However, we may agree to a request to discuss in advance and in general terms the kinds of topics an interview will cover.

Satire

Under certain circumstances, satire can be an effective way to reach and communicate with target audiences. All satirical output must be clearly labeled as such, and permission from the relevant language service director or regional director must be sought prior to publication. When doing satire, a conscious effort should be made to target a broad range of subjects. Satirical content should not contain religious, ethnic, socio-economic or cultural slurs.

Smear Campaigns Against RFE/RL Journalists

If you are the target of a smear campaign on social media leveling serious charges against you such as corruption, criminal activity, or biased reporting, you should take the following steps:

- Inform your Service Director of the campaign against you. Service Directors will consult with the Editor-in-Chief, Regional Directors, the General Counsel, and with the Director of Media and Public Affairs so that RFE/RL can consider a company-level response.
- Do not respond to the attacks on your own social media channel. Doing so risks adding fuel to the debate and enabling it to escalate further.

Social Media

The core principle animating the Company's social media policy ([1.4. Social Media](#)) is that RFE/RL employees must not do or say anything on social media sites that could undermine RFE/RL's reputation for journalistic balance and objectivity. Accordingly, this policy imposes tighter constraints on the creators of RFE/RL's journalism (i.e., members of the News Division) than it does on all other Company employees.

In addition to the constraints that apply to all employees under the company's social media policy, members of the News Division must comply with the following rules and principles, on both their private social media accounts and their work-related accounts:

- 1.** Do not use your social media to advance a political cause, support a political party, or send messages that will undermine our audience's trust in your impartiality. If you can't say it on air, don't say it on social media.
- 2.** You may "friend" or "follow" public figures but do not friend or follow people from only one political party or from only one side of a debate. This also applies to interacting with content online, such as commenting, sharing, liking, or retweeting.
- 3.** You are encouraged to share published RFE/RL content on your social media accounts.

4. You may *not* post raw or unpublished content that has been prepared or is being prepared by an RFE/RL service on your personal social media account.

5. You may tweet or post on your social media accounts about what you do or see as an RFE/RL journalist. But remember: if you would not say it on air, do not say it on social media.

6. If you use a personal social media account where you also discuss political or social issues, you must identify yourself as an RFE/RL journalist. Bear in mind that constructive discussion is based upon fact-based journalism, not upon emotion or opinion.

7. Service Directors must inform each of the Service's freelancers about RFE/RL's Social Media policy.

Stock Photos

As a rule, RFE/RL avoids illustrating news reports with stock photos (generic photos provided by companies such as Shutterstock and depicting general themes). Instead, we use photographs which are directly connected to the reported events and which are taken by our own photographers or by news agencies with which we have license agreements.

If no photos directly connected to the story are available, we may use stock photos or artwork. However, we do not use them if they introduce confusion into a report.

An example will help clarify how stock photos can introduce confusion:

A web editor posts a story about a murder but has no news photos connected to the event. He therefore uses a stock photo of a gloved hand holding a knife. Viewers will likely assume that the photo is of the murder weapon; however, the report says that the murder weapon has not been found. Thus, using the illustration might convey false information.

Remember: a reader cannot be expected to always observe that the credit line on a photograph is "stock image" and to understand that the photograph is purely decorative and not intended to have news value.

Suicide and Attempted Suicide

We usually do not report on suicides unless (1) the person involved is a public figure, (2) the suicide is newsworthy because it has a public impact, or (3) the suicide is part of a developing pattern of behavior in response to social or economic pressures.

When we report on suicides and attempted suicides, we use sensitivity in our language and choice of images.

To respect the dignity of the individual involved, we avoid sensational or dramatic images depicting, for example, the person standing on a ledge or showing the moment of death.

To respect the grief of bereaved families, we avoid close-ups of the victim's face if we show a picture of the corpse.

We avoid publishing the contents of a suicide note unless they are essential to the news story.

We bear in mind that stories about suicide can have an effect on vulnerable individuals who are contemplating taking their own lives. We therefore avoid images or descriptions that make suicide look easy, painless, or certain to result in death. We do not show exactly how it can be done. Especially in the case of adolescent victims, we do not speculate about the motivations for suicide, such as family problems or rejection by friends or romantic partners, unless authorities or close relatives are convinced of them.

We may report technical details about the method of a suicide when they are essential to a news story, for example, when there is controversy over whether the death was a suicide or murder.

We do not identify specific locations as places where people frequently go to end their own lives, for example a certain bridge or metro station. We also take care not to link

together individual acts of suicide to suggest a trend unless there is clear evidence that justifies doing so.

We refrain from mentioning social websites that promote or glamorize suicide unless they are essential to a news story.

Terrorism

Statements by Terrorist Groups

RFE/RL does not provide a platform for non-government armed groups or individuals conducting attacks that target or kill civilians, nor does it provide a platform for those who represent them.

We will not broadcast terrorists speaking live, broadcast raw interviews with terrorists, or broadcast excerpts of terrorists speaking at length.

Under no circumstances will we broadcast calls for violence or calls to join terrorist groups.

We may summarize what terrorists say in their public statements or interviews, put their remarks in context, and explain their significance.

On occasion, we may use brief cuts or clips (a few seconds, not minutes) of terrorists speaking if what they say is of news value. Cuts or clips may only be broadcast with the approval of the relevant service director, in consultation with a regional director as needed.

Any exceptions to this policy on a case-by-case basis must have the express approval of the Editor-in-Chief.

Be aware that extremist groups often claim responsibility for violent attacks to spread terror and attract new recruits. It can be difficult to verify whether claims made on behalf of terrorist groups are genuine. If you are unable to find a second source attributing the claim to the group, note in your report that the claim has not yet been independently confirmed.

Designation of Groups as Terrorist

RFE/RL does not itself designate specific groups or individuals as terrorists or sponsors of terrorism. However, we quote governments and officials when they accuse specific parties of terrorism. And we note, when necessary to the story, whether other governments make the same charge.

If, for example, Turkey accuses the United States of arming a Syrian-Kurdish group which Ankara considers a terrorist group but Washington does not, we would note the disagreement.

We will quote people using “terrorist” and “terrorism” as generic terms that are not linked to specific groups. For example, we would quote a witness to a bombing saying he/she considers it a terrorist attack and we would quote an official speaking about the need to combat terrorism.

Bear in mind that there is often disagreement over what kind of action constitutes terrorism. Many people define any attack by an armed individual or group upon civilians for political or ideological purposes as terrorism, while others also include attacks upon police or soldiers.

To avoid imposing our own definitions, RFE/RL describes attacks in terms of how they happened but does not characterize them ourselves as terrorism. We say “the suicide bombing” or the “mass shooting” and we describe the perpetrators as “attackers” or “an extremist group” or “an armed militant organization.”

If there is uncertainty about how to handle such news items, the journalist should discuss it with his/her Service Director and/or Regional Director as soon as possible before broadcast or publication.

Images of Terrorist Acts: Public Executions, Bombings, Abuse of Hostages

Terrorist organizations carry out acts that are calculated to frighten the public because these acts are “force multipliers” for the groups. If a group can frighten the public into accepting its demands in order to avoid further acts of the same kind, the group has achieved a result it might not have the strength to achieve through politics or on the battlefield.

For this reason, careful consideration should be given to whether the news value of images of terrorist acts (often disseminated by the terrorist organization itself via social media, for example, in beheadings) outweigh the danger of acting as a unwitting channel for spreading the terrorists’ message of fear.

When we report a terrorist act, we should also be sure the images are authentic and avoid using images that present graphic or shocking depictions of death. We may crop a picture to remove intentionally disturbing portions and we generally avoid images that show the moment of death. On a case-by-case basis, we may mask or blur faces sufficiently to conceal victims’ identities, recognizing that civilian adults and children have a greater right to privacy than do soldiers and other public figures. We do not use an image simply because it is being widely shown on other news or social media sites.

A simple guideline for newsworthiness is: does the image convey information that advances the story, for example, about the attacker’s motives or methods? Remember that by now images of executioners posing with knives behind their victims are highly familiar to the public and that publishing them may not convey as much information as a less familiar image. The photo of a memorial service for a victim can be a better choice for communicating a tragedy than is an image distributed by a terrorist group and which is calculated only to sow fear.

If there is any uncertainty as to how to handle images of terrorist acts, the journalist should discuss it with his/her Service Director and/or Regional Director as soon as possible before broadcast or publication.

Tone of Moderation and Respect

Broadcasts and publications shall at all times maintain a calm and moderate tone, exhibit civilized, reasoned discourse, and promote respect for the human rights of all persons.

Broadcasts and publications should not contain any religious, ethnic, socio-economic, or cultural slurs and shall observe common standards of etiquette and taste.

Broadcasts and publications shall not contain material that could be construed as inflammatory or as incitement to violence. Programming on societal or political disturbances or other tense situations must be balanced and factual.

Two-Source Rule

RFE/RL follows a two-source rule in verifying news before publishing or broadcasting it to our audience.

News reports

We do not broadcast news from news agencies (examples: AP, Reuters, AFP), TV stations, or reputable on-line news sites unless the same news is reported independently by at least two separate sources. We also cross-check the two sources to be sure that they not only report the same item but that the details of the reports support each other. If the reports conflict on significant details, we inform our audience of the discrepancy. If the reports conflict on minor details, we may omit reporting those details until the discrepancy is resolved.

Our own correspondent's verified reports do not need to be double sourced.

If information is available from only one media outlet but can be confirmed through our own reporting, we will do the reporting rather than await confirmation by another media outlet. Similarly, if different agencies report conflicting details about an event and the discrepancy can be resolved by our own reporting, we will do the reporting rather than wait for the news agencies' updates.

State News Agencies

Be aware that we only use information from state-run or government-controlled news agencies (examples: Tass, CCTV, Xinhua, IRNA, and others) as a source for statements by officials of their own countries or as a source of non-political news from their own countries that we believe they are reporting accurately. In such cases, they may be the only source of the information and can be used a single source.

We do not use state-run or government-controlled news agencies as either a first or second source of news about other countries, as they may be used as channels for disinformation. Similarly, we do not embed posts or videos about other countries from state agencies because this can redirect our audience to a source of disinformation.

Material from state-controlled agencies may also be used in analytical stories about their coverage of events (example, a story on how Russian media reported on an event in the United States) or for the purpose of our own investigative reporting.

Images of conflicts from state news agencies

The same considerations above apply to photos and video from state news agencies.

Note, however, that during wars, a state's news agencies may be one of the very few or only sources for images of that state's engagement in the conflict. In such cases, we observe the following practices:

— we use a state news agency photo only if there are no images of the same event available from an independent news agency (due to limited access to the area).

— we remain alert to the possibility that the state agency's photos and accompanying information may seek to present false images of events. *In case of any doubts about any aspect of a photo, consult with an editor before using. Advice can also be sought from the Central Newsroom Photo Desk.*

— we will not repeat verbatim captions provided by state news agencies. We will prepare our own caption noting, with attribution to the state agency, when and where the photo was made. If available, we provide additional context about the depicted event based on reports from credible news sources.

— If a photo or video is identified by the Central Newsroom's Photo Desk as being false or manipulated, the Photo Desk will alert all news teams and the images will not be used.

Exclusive reports by other news media

If a single reputable media organization reports a news item based upon confidential information, and we cannot confirm the information immediately ourselves or through another news agency, we will publish or broadcast the exclusive with attribution to the single media organization so long as the information is of major news importance and likely to generate significant reaction. This includes exclusives based upon information leaked to a single outlet by anonymous government officials.

Exclusive reports by RFE/RL

When RFE/RL has obtained exclusive information and we have full confidence in our sources, we will publish and broadcast the exclusive without waiting for another news agency to confirm it.

RFE/RL's exclusive news may be based upon an on-the-record interview, upon confidential information from a newsmaker, upon what we have uncovered through our investigative reporting, or upon what we have witnessed. Before publishing or broadcasting exclusive information, we cross-check it among several of our sources in order to have full confidence in its accuracy.

Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is an information-processing technology that, in response to users' questions and commands, can generate extremely sophisticated analytical reports, news articles, videos, music, and audio, among other uses.

However, while generative AI is proving highly efficient in collecting and organizing material available on the internet into information products at high speeds, the extent to which it can be usefully integrated into RFE/RL's news operations remains uncertain. The advantages of speed which AI offers must be weighed carefully against the challenge of assuring that the products it compiles are accurate, objective, and balanced, i.e., that they conform to professional journalistic standards.

We therefore observe the following practices regarding use of AI for our journalism:

We do **not** use generative AI to write any content that will appear in our published or broadcast reports. This comprises all forms of text, including headlines, captions, social media posts, etc.

We do **not** use generative AI to create any content such as images, video, music, or other audio that will appear in our published or broadcast reports.

We **only** use generative AI to do research, brainstorm, find inspiration, or to simplify the planning of tasks.

We also observe these cautions:

Fact-checking is essential when using generative AI for research. Generative AI is only as accurate as the sources it draws upon; do not assume that all these sources are authoritative or have been vetted and verified by AI services.

Be mindful that some of the sources that AI utilizes may be biased; do not assume that AI services vet for bias or seek to assure balance in the information they present.

Also be mindful that AI platforms have the on-demand ability to create real-looking but entirely fictional news stories using fake quotes attributed to real or apparently real sources.

Use of Hidden Cameras and Microphones

RFE/RL prides itself on the transparency of its newsgathering. As a rule, we inform those we interview that we are journalists and we do not conceal the purpose of our work. However, under exceptional circumstances and in order to serve the public interest – for

example in a corruption investigation -- we may use hidden recording equipment to obtain information that cannot be obtained in any other way.

In each individual case, the use of concealed cameras or microphones will pose legal and ethical concerns that must be carefully considered. For this reason, prior approval by a Service Director, in consultation with a Regional Director and RFE/RL's legal counsel, always must be sought before concealed equipment is utilized and before any information gathered with it is broadcast or published. Any use of hidden cameras or microphones must also be generally consistent with the media practices of the specific country involved.

Here are some general guidelines to follow:

Use of hidden cameras and microphones by RFE/RL reporters and stringers

Concealed long-range cameras and microphones can be used to photograph or record people *in public spaces*. Examples might include filming a policeman receiving a bribe while on duty or filming the arrival of politicians for a secret meeting to be held in a house.

If there are extraordinary reasons for doing so, a reporter may use a concealed camera or microphone to record a conversation *in which he or she takes part*. However, a journalist is not permitted to obtain the recording by claiming a false identity. A journalist does not have to volunteer the information that he or she is a journalist but the journalist may not deliberately deceive an interviewee by claiming to be a doctor, potential business partner, a job seeker, or by otherwise creating a fictitious persona. Any exceptions to these principles need to be approved by the editor-in-chief (See Investigative Reporting.)

It is never permissible for a reporter to *bug a home, office, or telephone* by leaving behind a hidden microphone or by using a high-powered device from a distance.

Use of material secretly recorded by third parties

Media organizations at times receive secret recordings made by a participants at events that are closed to the public or press. Examples range from secret recordings of meetings between top government officials where potentially compromising things are discussed to secret recordings made by students in a classroom where a teacher verbally or physically threatens children.

As a general rule, RFE/RL may broadcast or publish material secretly recorded by third parties as long as the material was freely given to us and is clearly identified as having been obtained by someone other than our own staff members or stringers. However, utmost care must be taken to assure that the material is authentic, that sharing it serves the public interest, and that the identity of minors is protected. (See Children and Teens.) In all such cases, a Service Director's permission and approval by our legal counsel is required before the material can be aired or published.

Use of UGC (User Generated Content)

SOLICITING, VERIFYING, AND (RE)PUBLISHING VISUAL MATERIAL FROM OUR AUDIENCES

User Generated Content (UGC), such as videos, photos, or audio, can add significant value to our reports. These are testament to our vast network of sources, our awareness of social trends and issues, the ongoing conversations that we have with our audiences, and their trust in us.

However, while we welcome the use of UGC, the social videos and other uses we make of it must meet the same editorial standards we apply to all our journalistic content.

Obtaining UGC

We obtain UGC by searching social media for pertinent material (social newsgathering) or by directly soliciting UGC from the public. We may do this to add eyewitness accounts, photos, and videos to our reporting of news events. We also may do this to receive news tips or to collect material that highlights social issues that addresses editorially important topics.

When we solicit UGC from witnesses who are present at news events such as natural disasters, civil unrest, and terrorist attacks, our priority is to remind contributors not to put themselves at risk of harm or to hinder the work of rescue organizations. A message to this effect should always be prominently included in any call for eyewitness input that we publish across platforms.

We do not use UGC as commentary, analysis, or satire.

Copyright and UGC

We apply the same copyright standards to UGC that we apply to any content that is not original to RFE/RL.

When we solicit original UGC from our audience, we make it clear in the solicitation that their submission serves as permission to RFE/RL to publish their original material. We state in the solicitation how we intend to use it. We note that we may share it with third parties.

When members of the audience spontaneously send UGC to us, editors should take reasonable steps to confirm that the sender *really did* capture the material and we must obtain written authorization from the owner to use the material. We make clear to the owner how we intend to use and credit the material and note that we share it with third parties.

When RFE/RL takes UGC or other material from the web, we take reasonable steps to discover who its original creator is. We contact the owner and obtain written permission to re-publish the material. We make clear to the owner how we intend to use and credit the material and note that we may share it with third parties. (This includes taking photographs

from individuals' *private* social media accounts — to re-publish them we must have permission from the account holder. Exceptions in the case of significant news value and public interest require permission from RFE/RL's Standards Editors, who will consult with RFE/RL's legal counsel.)

Please refer to our copyright policy for details:

<https://libertynet.rferl.org/a/copyright/20468.html>

Selecting, Verifying, and Producing UGC

Like any other material obtained from external sources, UGC has to be of journalistic value to warrant its publication. We do not publish UGC merely because it is visually compelling. Nor do we re-distribute raw UGC as it is received, for example, as non-contextualized social media posts.

We subject UGC to rigorous review to verify the information it contains and add context and editorial value, and only publish UGC if we are convinced of its authenticity and accuracy. For eyewitness accounts, this should be done by (1) cross-checking the content against possible corroborating information such as satellite imagery, the accounts of other eyewitnesses or reporters who are known to be, or to have been, on the scene and (2) by questioning the senders closely about their precise whereabouts and activities.

We inform our audiences in the video packages or in accompanying caption text of the extent to which we were able to verify or not verify key details. We also add necessary context and background (for instance, in the videos or in accompanying caption text or via links) so that the information in the UGC can be understood as a part of larger events or trends.

If the UGC represents just one side in a public controversy, we add mention of the position of the other side. If it is possible to obtain a direct response from the other side, we attempt to do so. We include mention of the attempt and its results in our reporting.

We also respect the right of people shown in UGC to a reasonable level of privacy, particularly when recorded in a private space such as a home. We may mask or blur people's faces when necessary, to protect them from unsubstantiated accusations of wrongdoing, to public embarrassment, or to public ridicule.

UGC cannot compare to professional material in production quality. We understand that its rawness is testament to its authenticity. Therefore, editors have some leeway to include in their reports UGC that is of amateur quality or lightly edited. As with any visual materials, if they contain violent or disturbing images, we should warn our audience.

Vox Pops

We conduct vox pops (informal street samples of public opinion) to obtain a quick sense of popular reaction to news events. Whether conducted for radio or television, vox pops are a useful technique for assuring that the opinions of ordinary people are included in our coverage and for adding local color to a story.

In conducting vox pops, we identify to our audience who is speaking and why they are in a position to have an informed opinion about the subject. We ask respondents for full name, age, and status (for example, “teacher”).

Recognizing that in some countries people are reluctant to publicly express themselves on issues, we may in exceptional cases accept respondents’ requests to use their first-name only in radio vox pops, or to give no name in television vox pops (so long as their faces are visible). We will never accept respondents’ requests for full name and visual anonymity, since vox pops are not sufficiently essential to RFE/RL’s programming to warrant it. (See Anonymity and Pseudonyms.)

Remember that vox pops are only *informal surveys* and should not be used to make predictions about future public behavior. That is the domain of *scientific polls* of public opinion, which are based upon formal methodologies to randomly sample a population.

A key goal of vox pops is to obtain lively quotes that convey how respondents feel about a subject. We ask questions that are open-ended to encourage responses that go beyond a simple yes or no (for example, “What do you think about the two candidates in this election?” instead of simply “Will you vote in the election?”)

We do not use vox pop quotes which contain false information or create doubts about the established, evidence-based facts regarding an issue.

If one opinion emerges as dominant among the people we speak to, we reflect this in the finished product. However, we also include a fair representation of the whole range of opinions that were expressed.

Unless the subject of a vox pop focuses on a specific group, we try to ensure that our informal street survey includes people from a variety of walks of life.

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