



## **WMFE Ethics Guidelines**

WMFE's audience must be able to trust that WMFE news will provide unbiased reporting based on fact and careful analysis. To that end, WMFE reporters and editorial staff must adhere to the highest standards of journalism. The following guidelines govern the ethical conduct of all WMFE journalists. They have been adapted from ethics codes at respected organizations, including National Public Radio and the Society for Professional Journalists, in consultation with current and former public radio news directors from across the system.

These guidelines shall apply to all WMFE journalists, including the News Director, Assistant News Director, reporters, editors, news producers, and regular hosts of Morning Edition and All Things Considered, whether or not they report to the News Director. Breaches of these guidelines will be dealt with on a case by case basis. Such breaches could result in disciplinary action, up to and including termination.

### **ACCURACY**

WMFE editorial staff will make every effort to ensure that all stories, whether broadcast or otherwise published, are factually accurate. To that end:

1. WMFE journalists will fact check all claims before they are broadcast and certify to the editor prior to broadcast that all facts have been properly verified. Presenting the information in a script will constitute certification.
2. WMFE journalists will test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error.
3. WMFE journalists will not relate information from other news sources unless it can be verified by at least one other independent source.
4. WMFE journalists will inform the News Director of any mistake of fact. The News Director will decide whether an on-air correction is appropriate.
5. Under no circumstances will WMFE journalists attempt to color or shade facts for impact or editorial effect.

### *Note on Accuracy*

Failure to properly check facts or an attempt to distort facts endangers the reputation of WMFE and may expose the station to legal liability. WMFE News staff is expected to follow these guidelines without exception, to go 'the extra mile' to verify claims, and to seek the advice of the News Director on any question in this regard. In setting such a standard, WMFE recognizes that it may sometimes be necessary to delay reporting a news item to ensure the accuracy of the report. This is an acceptable trade-off.

## **FAIRNESS**

1. WMFE journalists will make sure actualities, quotes or paraphrases of those we interview are accurate and are used in the proper context. An actuality from an interviewee or speaker should reflect accurately what that person was asked or was responding to.
2. WMFE journalists will respect 'off the record' agreements with background sources.
3. WMFE journalists will provide attribution (or sufficient source identification) for every quote. Reporters will avoid using anonymous sources where possible. In rare instances, a reporter may grant anonymity after consulting with the News Director. The grant of anonymity is between WMFE News and the source, not between the reporter and the source. The reporter and editor should know the identities of all the interviewees. However, WMFE staff members *outside* the news department do not need to know the identities of anonymous sources. The News Director will have final approval for airing information from the anonymous source. Other notes on anonymity:
  - \*WMFE will question sources' motives before promising anonymity.
  - \*WMFE will not grant anonymity if a person makes pejorative comments about the character, reputation, or personal qualities of another individual or institution.
  - \*The information provided by an anonymous source must be confirmed with at least one other independent source, unless this is impossible (i.e. the source is describing an event with no witnesses, such as domestic violence, etc.).
  - \*WMFE will clarify conditions attached to any promise of anonymity.
  - \*If anonymity is granted, WMFE will aggressively protect the identity of the source in question.
4. WMFE journalists will not intentionally exploit people in pain or immediate emotional distress. They will show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage and use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
5. WMFE journalists will make clear when a person is being recorded and when an interview has begun or ended so there is no question about what is or isn't for broadcast, or what is on the record or not.

6. WMFE journalists will respect embargoes unless the circumstances surrounding the embargo make adherence inappropriate, such as when the information has already surfaced elsewhere or a strong public interest requires the disclosure to place other news in the proper context. The journalist will consult with the News Director to make that determination.

7. Plagiarism is an unforgivable offense. WMFE journalists will not take other peoples' work and present it as our own.

8. WMFE journalists will attribute information from other news sources if the material is the result of enterprise reporting, an exclusive interview, etc.

9. Journalism should be conducted in the open. WMFE journalists will not misrepresent themselves. However, there will be occasions not to declare our profession but rather to seek information as a member of the public working in places to which the general public has access, such as stores, public buildings, etc.

## **BALANCE**

Balance assumes no monopoly of ideas and implies respect for the listener's interest in forming a well-rounded opinion, including the perspectives of subjects with less access to a public voice. WMFE editorial staff will seek a diversity of opinion on issues and subjects covered.

At a minimum, WMFE journalists will endeavor to:

1. Pursue multiple perspectives in their reporting;
2. Offer an opportunity for subjects to respond to direct or indirect allegations;
3. When possible, go beyond superficial bi-polarism ("he said/she said"; "Republicans say/ Democrats say") by giving a voice to people directly impacted;
4. Not offer an open forum to a single viewpoint without offering a similar opportunity for divergent or opposing viewpoints.

Balance is not exclusively measured by the length of opposing sound bites. Tone, focus, and subject matter are also factors. Often balance will be achieved by presenting a diversity of views in a single story; other times, balance may best be achieved over a period of time (a three day series, each with a different perspective; back to back interviews on subsequent days; etc.).

## **INDEPENDENCE**

Independence will be a cornerstone of the WMFE News product. WMFE journalists will make every effort to ensure that all stories remain editorially independent of any outside influence.

1. WMFE News staff will research and report news based solely on editorial judgment without deference to outside influences, including but not limited to WMFE executives and senior staff, WMFE's Board of Trustees, WMFE underwriters and funders, political parties, special interest groups, businesses and any outside entity which would seek influence or control over WMFE editorial content.
2. A firewall will be maintained between WMFE journalists and the station's underwriters and funders. WMFE recognizes that funding or sponsorship for WMFE will not in any way influence the news product or style of reporting on any subject. WMFE will not ask its journalists to solicit underwriting or corporate sponsorship for the station or to appear in circumstances in which they might appear to be doing so.
3. If a WMFE journalist reports on an underwriter, funder, or board member, he or she must consult with the News Director on whether to disclose the relationship on air.
4. While reporters or editors may check passages with sources for accuracy and clarity, no source has veto power or editing rights over WMFE news stories. WMFE journalists do not allow sources or interviewees to dictate how a topic will be covered or which other voices or ideas will be included. They do not agree to submit questions in advance unless the News Director approves doing so in a specific instance.
5. WMFE journalists do not pay for information from sources or newsmakers.

## **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

It is important that WMFE news staffers conduct themselves in a manner that reflects independence and fairness, thereby avoiding actual or apparent conflicts of interest. To that end, members of the WMFE news team should not engage in outside activities or public comment that calls into question their ability to report fairly and accurately on a given subject.

1. All WMFE news staffers must disclose potential conflicts of interest to the News Director before covering a story. Reporters must disclose any business, commercial, financial or personal interests that might be construed as an actual or potential conflict of interest. This would include situations in which the journalist or his/her immediate family has or has had a business or personal relationship with the persons being interviewed or companies/organizations being covered.
2. WMFE journalists may not run for office, endorse candidates, or otherwise engage in politics. Since contributions to candidates are part of the public record, WMFE journalists may not contribute to political campaigns, as doing so would call into question a journalist's impartiality.

3. WMFE journalists may not participate in marches or rallies involving causes or issues that WMFE covers, nor should they sign petitions or otherwise lend their name to such causes, or contribute money to them. WMFE journalists should tell the News Director about any financial contributions to or affiliation with any political or public issue campaign or involvement with any group for which advocacy is a major purpose.

4. WMFE journalists may not serve on government boards or commissions.

5. WMFE journalists may sit on community advisory boards, educational institution trustee boards, boards of religious organizations or boards of nonprofit organizations so long as WMFE does not normally cover them and they are not engaged in significant lobbying or political activity. Such activities should be disclosed to and approved by the News Director. WMFE may revoke approval if it believes continued service will create an actual or appearance of a conflict of interest.

6. While the nature of online social networking is ever-changing, WMFE journalists should be aware of their public profiles online and ensure that they do not post any publically available content that would compromise their impartiality. The above guidelines about affiliations with political and advocacy groups apply to online groups as well.

## **FREELANCE WORK AND OUTSIDE ENGAGEMENTS**

The primary responsibility of WMFE journalists is to gather, write, edit and produce news for WMFE. Therefore, outside work, freelancing, and speaking engagements must be considered and approved on a case-by-case basis by the News Director. The following are some general guidelines:

1. WMFE journalists may not produce news stories for any other local media outlet (broadcast or print) without prior approval of the News Director. The News Director will not unreasonably deny approval of the proposed work if it does not create a conflict of interest for the employee or WMFE.

2. WMFE journalists must consult with their supervisors before engaging in outside freelance and journalistic work, including writing books and articles and self-publishing in blogs or other electronic media, whether or not compensated. Approval will not be unreasonably denied if the proposed work will not discredit WMFE, conflict with WMFE's interests, create a conflict of interest for the employee or interfere with the employee's ability to perform WMFE duties.

3. WMFE journalists may not speak to groups where the journalist's appearance might call his or her impartiality into question. Such instances include situations where the employee's appearance may appear to endorse the agenda of a group or organization. WMFE journalists must consult with the News Director before serving as speakers, presenters, moderators, panelists, or otherwise being directly associated with a non-station event. The News Director will not unreasonably deny approval if it does not create a conflict of interest for the employee or WMFE.

4. WMFE journalists may only accept speaking fees from educational or nonprofit groups not engaged in significant lobbying or political activity.

5. WMFE staff journalists may not engage in public relations work, paid or unpaid. Exceptions may be made for certain volunteer nonprofit, nonpartisan activities (i.e. working for a church or synagogue or charitable organization), so long as they do not conflict with WMFE's reporting on activities or issues in which the outside organization is active. Reporters must get prior approval for said activity from the News Director.

6. WMFE journalists must consult with their supervisors before appearing on TV or other media. In appearing on TV or other media, including electronic Web-based forums, WMFE journalists should not express views they would not air in their roles as WMFE journalists. They should not participate in shows, electronic forums, or blogs that encourage punditry and speculation rather than fact-based analysis.

## **GIFTS**

1. WMFE journalists may not accept compensation from the people or institutions they cover or any groups or companies with a vested interest in WMFE news coverage. This includes any property or benefits of significant value. Unsolicited items of significant value must be returned to the sender with a letter stating our policy on gifts. Exceptions to this policy include:

- a. Books or CDs provided by authors/publishers/promoters for potential review or stories
- b. Meals at conferences, meetings and conventions where food is provided as a convenience for the press as a whole
- c. Tickets to movie screenings, performances, theme parks and attractions, or similar activities *that are attended for the purpose of producing stories for air*
- d. Paid travel and meals for speaking engagements and awards ceremonies that meet the guidelines established in the previous section of this code.

2. WMFE journalists may not sell items like books, CDs, etc. that they receive for review or potential stories. These items can be distributed to WMFE staff for personal use or donated to charities when no longer needed.