



VOLUNTARY MEDIA COUNCIL OF ZIMBABWE

CODE OF CONDUCT FOR ZIMBABWEAN MEDIA PRACTITIONERS (hereinafter referred to as "this code")

PREAMBLE

This Code serves to provide a set of common reporting standards for media practitioners and media institutions in the print, broadcast, television and new media sector in Zimbabwe to ensure professional and gender-sensitive coverage of news and information.

Media practitioners and media institutions should abide by these standards and the public is entitled to expect that they will do so. There should be a remedy for those men and women harmed by media conduct that violates these standards.

This Code will be applied and enforced by the Media Complaints Committee.

1 INTERPRETATION

In this Code: "media institution" means any institution in Zimbabwe, whether in the public or private sector, that disseminates news to the public through the medium of a newspaper and/or other written or electronic broadcasting.

"media practitioner" means a reporter, editor, photographer, radio and television programme producer and presenter, employed by a media institution or a freelance reporter or columnist who is a stringer or writes columns for a media institution.

In this Code gender mainstreaming is the process of assessing the different implications for women and men in the coverage of news, analysis, commentary, opinion and information.

While sex identifies the biological difference between men and women, gender identifies the social relation between men and women. It concerns human relations and is thus socially constructed. Rooted in gender are issues of dominance, power and rule. Gender is the culturally specific set of characteristics that identifies the social behaviour of women and men and the relationship between them.

Gender, therefore, refers not simply to women or men, but to the relationship between them, and the way it is socially constructed. Because it is a relational term, gender must include women and men. Like the concepts of class, race and ethnicity, gender is an analytical tool for understanding social processes.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to machines that perform cognitive tasks like thinking, perceiving, learning, problem-solving, decision-making and in the context of media and journalism, generating news stories, pictures, graphics and illustrations among many other functions as the technology evolves.

2 APPLICATION

This Code will govern the conduct of media practitioners and media institutions that have agreed to be bound by this Code and to submit to the disciplinary jurisdiction of the Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe.

3 GENERAL STANDARDS

a) Media practitioners and media institutions must carry out their function of informing, educating and entertaining the public by maintaining the highest professional and ethical standards

and ensuring gender balanced and sensitive content that treats men and women equally as news sources and subjects.

b) Media practitioners must defend the principle of the freedom of the media to freely access, collect and disseminate information and to publish comments and criticisms. They must oppose censorship, suppression of news and the dissemination of propaganda.

4 TRUTH AND ACCURACY

a) Media practitioners and media institutions must report and interpret the news with scrupulous honesty and must take all reasonable steps to ensure that they disseminate accurate information without distortions and/or discrimination to any subject, be it either women or men.

b) When compiling reports media practitioners must check their facts and the editors and publishers of newspapers and other media must take proper care not to publish inaccurate information. Before a media institution publishes a report, the reporter and the editor must ensure that all the steps a reasonable competent and objective practitioner would take to check its accuracy have been taken. Verifying facts, sources, and/or offering a response must always be the first priority before disseminating information; the notion of urgency or immediacy should not have overall precedence.

c) Media practitioners and media institutions must never publish information that they know to be false, gender insensitive or maliciously make unfounded allegations about people that are intended to harm their reputation, this includes any unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics, including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexual orientation, and family relationships, religious beliefs, or physical or intellectual disability which may result in any form of harm.

d) Special care must be taken to check the accuracy of stories that may cause harm to individuals or organisations or to the public interest.

e) (i) A clear distinction should be made between comment, fact and opinion to promote clarity, accuracy and fairness in journalism. A fact can be proven and is based on objective evidence, whereas opinions are subjective and based on personal interpretation. Commentary refers to the expression of opinions, analysis or personal interpretations of events, news or topics by journalists, columnists, media outlets or experts. Commentary should be clearly presented as commentary, not as factual reporting.

(ii) A comment or expression of opinion must be a genuine and honest comment or expression of opinion relating to established fact rather than sexist myths, stereotypes or conjecture.

(iii) Comment or conjecture must not be presented in such a way as to create an impression that it is established fact.

5 BALANCE AND FAIRNESS

a) Media institutions must endeavour to provide full, fair and balanced reports of events and not suppress or exaggerate essential information pertaining to those events or subjects. They must not distort information by exaggerating, by giving only one side of a story, by placing improper emphasis on one aspect of a story, by reporting the facts out of context in which they occurred or by suppressing relevant available facts on the basis of the gender of those being covered. They must avoid misleading headlines, sensationalism, billboard postings and perpetuation of stereotypes and character assassinations.

b) Before publishing a story of alleging wrongdoing by any person, all reasonable steps must be taken to ascertain the response of the alleged wrongdoer to the allegations. Any response from that person must be published together with the report setting out the allegations where possible. Treatment of all such cases should be objective irrespective of gender, race, class, culture and ethnicity.

c) Right of Reply- The right of reply is a fundamental principle in media ethics, ensuring fairness and balance in reporting. The media must give individuals or organizations who are the subject of criticism or negative reporting a fair opportunity to respond before the publication or broadcast of the material. Their response should be included in a timely manner within the same story, where possible.

(i) Accuracy of Response: The response from the individual or organization must be reported accurately, without distortion or misrepresentation. It should reflect their views as clearly as the criticism itself.

(ii) Equal Prominence: The reply should be given the same prominence as the original criticism. If the criticism appeared in a headline or a prominent section, the reply should be similarly placed, ensuring fairness and balance.

(iii) Timely Follow-Up: If a reply cannot be included before publication or broadcast, the media outlet must make every effort to include the response in a subsequent report or follow-up, providing it with sufficient visibility.

(iv) Exemptions: The right of reply may not be necessary in cases where the criticisms are trivial or where widely established facts are presented. However, this exemption should be applied with caution to avoid any unfair harm.

6 ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Ethical journalism means taking responsibility for one's work and explaining one's decisions to the public.

a) Media practitioners should acknowledge mistakes and correct them promptly and prominently. They should explain corrections and clarifications carefully and clearly.

b) If a media institution discovers that it has published a report containing a significant inaccuracy, distortion or insensitivity of the facts, it must publish a correction in a timely, explicit, complete and transparent manner and with comparable prominence.

c) If a media institution discovers that it has published an erroneous report that has caused harm to the reputation of a person or an institution's reputation, it must publish an apology promptly with due prominence.

d) A media institution must report fairly, sensitively and accurately the outcome of an action for defamation against it.

e) If a media organization collaborates with external groups (e.g., NGOs, research institutions), the nature of the relationship must be transparent, and the organization's editorial independence must remain intact.

f) Media outlets must disclose ownership structures that may influence their editorial direction. Media practitioners should be aware of ownership interests that could affect their independence and ensure these do not interfere with their reporting.

7 INDEPENDENCE

Independence is a fundamental principle of ethical journalism.

a) Editorial Independence: Media organizations must exercise full control over their editorial content, free from interference by advertisers, sponsors, political entities, advocacy groups, corporations, lobbyists or other external parties. Journalistic content must never be compromised by financial, political, or personal interests, real or perceived.

b) Separation of Editorial and Commercial Interests: Journalists must maintain a clear distinction between editorial content and advertising or sponsored material. Sponsored content must be clearly labeled as such to avoid misleading the audience.

c) Non-Partisanship: Journalists and media organizations must not align themselves with any political party, ideology, or candidate. Coverage of political events, elections, and government activities must be conducted fairly, without promoting or disadvantaging any side.

d) Avoiding Political Endorsements: News organizations should avoid endorsing political candidates or parties in a way that compromises their objectivity and credibility. Editorials or opinion pieces expressing political views should be clearly identified and kept separate from factual reporting.

e) Avoiding Conflicts of Interest- Media practitioners must avoid situations where their personal relationships or interests could influence their reporting. Any potential conflicts must be disclosed, and steps must be taken to mitigate bias.

f) Media practitioners must not cover stories in which they have a financial interest or allow financial interests to influence their coverage of individuals, companies, or issues.

g) Media practitioners should avoid taking jobs, consultancy roles, or other forms of outside employment that could conflict with their work as independent reporters or lead to a perception of bias.

h) Media practitioners and media organizations must be willing to defend their independence against external pressures, including from government bodies, corporations, and advocacy groups. Independence must not be compromised, even in difficult or controversial circumstances.

i) Media practitioners and media institutions must not use their freedom of the press to serve any other interest and refrain from receiving any unfair advantage or personal gain through the dissemination or non-dissemination of information and suppress or distort information which the public has a right to know because of pressure or influence from their advertisers or others who have a corporate, political, or advocacy interest in the media institution concerned.

j) (i) Bribes and Inducements- The media must not accept bribes, gifts, or any other form of financial incentive that could compromise their independence or the impartiality of their reporting. Any such offers must be disclosed to their employer and reported.

(ii) Media practitioners and media institutions must not publish or suppress a report or omit or alter vital facts in that report in return for payment of money, sexual favours or any other gift or reward.

8 HATRED OR VIOLENCE

a) Media practitioners and media institutions must not publish material that is intended or is likely to engender hostility or incite hatred or discriminatory practices towards persons on the grounds of their race, ethnic origin, nationality, gender, sexual orientations, physical or other disability, religion or political affiliation and beliefs.

b) Media institutions must take utmost care to avoid contributing to the spread of ethnic and sexist hatred or political violence.

c) Media institutions must take utmost care to avoid justifying or trivialising any cases of gender-based violence.

a) Media institutions and practitioners must not make any prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual's race, colour, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation or to any physical or mental illness or disability. The publication of such details must be avoided unless they have a direct relevance to the story.

b) Media institutions must avoid contributing to demeaning sexist portrayal of women and girls in advertising.

9 REPORTING ON ELECTIONS

a) Media practitioners and media institutions must ensure that media coverage of elections is comprehensive, fair and balanced and make certain that all candidates, parties and election issues are given equitable and gender sensitive coverage.

b) Before reporting a damaging allegation made against a candidate or a political party, a media practitioner should obtain, wherever possible, a comment from the candidate or party against whom the allegation has been made especially where the allegation has been made by an opposing candidate or an opposing political party.

c) A media practitioner or media institution must not accept any gift, reward or inducement from a politician or candidate.

d) As far as possible, a media practitioner or media institution should report the views of candidates and political parties directly and in their own words, rather than as they are described by others.

e) A journalist must take care in reporting the findings of opinion polls. Any report should wherever possible include details about the

methodology used in conducting the survey and by whom it was conducted.

10 REPORTING OF POLICE INVESTIGATIONS AND CRIMINAL COURT CASES

a) Media institutions are entitled to inform the public about the arrest of suspects by the police and the trial of persons accused of crimes.

Media practitioners must not do the following:  
• publish the names of suspects until the police have filed formal charges against them, unless it is in the public interest to do so before formal criminal charges are laid.  
• Willfully or unintentionally impede criminal investigations or harm legal processes.

• Name any subjects of a criminal inquiry either directly or indirectly prior to charging them, unless the police have made their name or other identifying information public.

They must:

• Preserve the anonymity of victims of sexual offences, except as permitted by law or with the person's expressed consent.

• Unless authorised by law or with the individual's expressed consent, protect the confidentiality of victims of sexual offences.

b) When reporting on court proceedings, journalists must be fair and accurate, and in compliance with any reporting restrictions or statutory prohibitions. Reports must clearly distinguish between what was heard in court and any information from other sources. It is highly recommended to take notes during court proceedings to ensure the accuracy of any court report written later.

c) Media practitioners must endeavour to provide a context to cases of gender-based violence beyond the issues reported in court.

d) Presumption of innocence

In our law a person is presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. Reports on police investigations, criminal court proceedings and other formal procedures must be free from prejudice. The principle of the presumption of innocence also applies to the Press. The media must therefore refrain from publishing articles prejudging the outcome in criminal cases or seeking to influence the outcome of cases.

e) Prejudice

Reports on investigations and court cases serve to inform the public in a careful way about crimes and other legal infringements, their prosecution and court judgement. In the process it must not prejudice accused person. The Press may call a person a perpetrator if he/she has made a confession and there is also evidence against him/her or if he/she committed the crime in public view. In reporting, the media is not required to use legal terms that are irrelevant to the reader. The aim of court reporting must not be to punish convicted criminals socially as well by using the media as a "pillory". Reports should make a clear distinction between suspicion and cases where a person has been proven guilty.

f) Follow-on reporting

Where a media institution has begun to report a criminal case, it must follow up and report subsequent developments in the case. For example, it is grossly unfair to report that a person has been charged with murder or rape and then fail to report that the person was acquitted. The report of the subsequent development must be given due prominence. This also applies to the dropping of an investigation.

g) Crimes committed by young persons

When reporting on investigations and criminal court proceedings involving young persons and on their appearance in court, the media must not identify, directly or indirectly, anyone under the age of 18 (eighteen) who are or have been involved in criminal, immigration and asylum or defendants in criminal proceedings, unless authorized by law.

h) Victims of crime

a) Media institutions must not identify victims of sexual assaults or publish material likely to contribute to such identification unless the victim has consented to such publication or the law authorises them to do so.

b) Media institutions must not provide excessive details of the method used, the specific location or speculate on the motives when reporting on self-harm, sexual assault and suicide. Reports of self-harm, sexual assault, and suicide should not overly explain the technique, the precise location, or conjecture about the reasons behind the actions.

i) Innocent relatives and friends

Media institutions should avoid identifying relatives and friends of a person convicted or accused of a crime unless the reference to them is necessary for the full, fair and accurate reporting of the crime or legal proceedings.

11 MEDICAL REPORTING

Media reports should not be sensationalist when dealing. When dealing with research, preliminary research should not be treated as conclusive.

12 RESPECT FOR PRIVACY

a) Media practitioners must not intrude into and/or report upon a person's private life without his or her consent.

b) Reporting on a person's private life can only be justified when it is in the public interest to do so. This would include:

- i) detecting or exposing criminal conduct;
- ii) detecting or exposing seriously anti-social conduct
- iii) protecting public health and safety
- iv) preventing the public from being misled by some statement or action of that individual, such as where a person is doing something in private which he or she is publicly condemning.

c) Media practitioners may probe and publish details about the private moral behaviour of a public official where such conduct has a bearing upon his or her suitability as a public official.

13 INTRUSIONS INTO GRIEF OR SHOCK

a) In cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries should be carried out and approaches made with sympathy, sensitivity and tact. It is insensitive to ask a bereaved person how he or she is feeling, neither does it add to the substance of a report.

b) Media practitioners or photographers making enquiries at a hospital or similar institution should normally identify themselves to a responsible official and obtain permission before entering non-public areas

14 INTERVIEWING OR PHOTOGRAPHING CHILDREN

a) Media practitioners should not interview or photograph a child under the age of 18 years in the absence of, or without the consent of a parent or an adult who is responsible for the child. Media practitioners should be careful when identifying parents, other siblings and family members of an abused child as the association may make it easy to identify the child. Media practitioners should:

b) avoid categorisations or descriptions that expose a child to negative reprisals – such as additional physical or psychological harm, or to lifelong abuse, discrimination or rejection.

- c) Media practitioners and media houses should change the name and obscure the visual or identity of any child who is identified as:  
i) a victim of sexual abuse or exploitation; or  
ii) a perpetrator of physical or sexual abuse; or  
iii) HIV positive, or living with AIDS, unless the child and the parent or a guardian gives fully informed consent; or  
iv) Being charged or convicted of a crime.  
v) Children should not be approached or photographed while at a school, crèche or similar institution without the permission of the appropriate authorities.  
vi) Child abuse should be reported as it is. For example, rather than media practitioners using demeaning labels such as child prostitutes, children should be regarded as victims because at law they are incapable of giving consent to sexual liaisons.

15 SURREPTITIOUS GATHERING OF INFORMATION

a) Media practitioners should use open methods of gathering information where they clearly identify themselves as media practitioners. Generally they should not obtain or seek to obtain information or pictures through surreptitious methods such as misrepresentation, deception, subterfuge or undercover techniques.

b) Surreptitious methods of information gathering may only be used where open methods have failed to yield information in what is public interest. These methods may thus be employed where, for example, they will help to detect or expose criminal activity or will bring to light information that will protect the public against serious threats to public health or safety.

16 NATIONAL SECURITY

a) Media institutions must not prejudice the legitimate national security interests of Zimbabwe and place at risk members of the Defence Forces and Security Services who are on active national duties.

b) This provision does not prevent the media from exposing corruption in security services or defence agencies or from commenting upon levels of expenditure on defence.

c) Media practitioners should refrain from assisting or collaborating with the police or other security services and rely solely on information from official sources.

17 PLAGIARISM / COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT

A media practitioner must not engage in plagiarism or copyright infringement.

a) Plagiarism consists of making use of another person's words or ideas without permission and without proper acknowledgment and attribution of the source of those words or ideas.

b) Copyright infringement refers to the unauthorised use, reproduction, distribution, modification, display or performance of copyrighted material without permission from the copyright owner.

Media Practitioners should seek consent for works they don't own and intend to use such words include photographs/videos/articles.

Media practitioners should give credit to sources of their work and not lift content from websites/TV/Newspapers or other Apps/sources without attribution.

18 PROTECTION OF SOURCES

a) Where a person has agreed to supply information on condition that his or her identity remains confidential and the media practitioner agrees to this condition, the media practitioner must respect this undertaking must never reveal the identity of the source.

b) However, the media practitioner may tell the source that his or her identity can be revealed if it becomes clear in a court of law that this information is needed to prevent or expose serious criminal conduct.

19 HARASSMENT

Media practitioners must always identify themselves as journalists and provide the name of their title when making contact. They must not engage in intimidation, harassment or deception and are required to comply immediately with any reasonable request to desist from contacting, following or communicating with a person.

20 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) GENERATED CONTENT

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is emerging as a helpful tool in publishing. Media institutions and practitioners must use AI-generated content in a transparent, accurate, fair, and accountable manner.

a) Media institutions and practitioners must treat AI sources as "off the record" and double check what AI refers to as "on the record" sources.

b) Media institutions should inform their audiences when publishing content aided by AI, about the technology's use and its limitations. Before being used in reporting, AI-generated content needs to be checked for factual correctness and accurateness.

c) Media practitioners must continue to use their professional judgment and decision-making skills in terms of accuracy, fairness and completeness when using AI-generated content.

d) Media institutions and practitioners must adhere to the moral and legal requirements of fair use when using AI generated content and ensure that they respect other people's intellectual property rights.

e) Media institutions must ensure that AI-generated visual content meet strict criteria and provide viewers with complete disclosure since the visual content is descriptive and is not a true portrayal of a real-life event or a news scenario.

f) Media institutions should ensure that the use of AI-generated content does not infringe upon people's right to privacy and that the information gathered and utilised for content generation complies with data protection regulations laws.

g) Media practitioners must be mindful of any possible biases in the AI-generated material they utilise and ensure that no person or group is subjected to discrimination by the content they utilise on the basis of their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.

h) Media institutions and practitioners must ensure for public safety and security when using AI-generated content and eliminate harmful misinformation or disinformation.

i) Media practitioners must take responsibility for any errors or inaccuracies in AI-generated content they use, they must be accountable to their audience and take corrective action if errors are found.

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