

# Editorial Code of Practice

Irish Independent

Sunday Independent

[independent.ie](http://independent.ie)

Sunday World

[sundayworld.com](http://sundayworld.com)

Herald

## Introduction

Mediahuis newspaper and online titles are pledged to be professional, courageous and relentless in their pursuit of truth and of news. They are also committed to independence, fairness and balance in informing people of events and issues about which they have a right to know.

An important goal of this code is to protect and foster the bond of trust between the Irish Independent, [independent.ie](http://independent.ie), Sunday Independent, Sunday World, [sundayworld.com](http://sundayworld.com) and Herald and their audiences.

The reputation of our brands is based on the editorial independence, integrity and high standards of our journalism. Full editorial control lies with the Editors.

The Editors and the editorial executives of the titles within the group are committed to defining, upholding and protecting those standards in every aspect of journalistic work. Central to those principles is the public's right to be informed on issues of public interest. This right is balanced by compliance with relevant legal codes, in particular the laws of defamation, privacy and data protection, and adherence to the principles of taste, balance, and accuracy.

Mediahuis newspaper and online titles adhere to the Press Ombudsman/Press Council of Ireland Editors' Code of Practice (See Appendix 1).

Every staff member must read this document carefully and reflect on how it might apply to his or her duties.

The provisions presented here can offer only broad principles and some examples. No written document could anticipate every possibility. We expect staff members to consult the Publisher, Deputy Publisher, Editors or other senior staff if they have any doubts about any particular situation covered by this document.

Mediahuis believes that its staff share the values this code is intended to protect. It will be the policy of the company to try to resolve any differences of opinion or concerns over the application of these values through discussion. Nevertheless, Mediahuis will view any deliberate violation of this code as serious and this may be the subject of a formal investigation.

## **1. General**

Journalists have a duty to observe and comply with the full letter and spirit of this Code of Conduct in the performance of duties for and in the name of Mediahuis. Journalists are expected to exhibit a high standard of propriety, integrity, efficiency and competence in all dealings.

## **2. Accuracy, distinguish fact from comment**

Journalists must strive to be accurate and establish the facts of circumstances. Stories must be well sourced, based on sound evidence, thoroughly tested and presented in language which distinguishes clearly between comment, conjecture and fact. Unfounded speculation should be avoided.

## **3. Fact checking**

Journalists must check and verify information, facts and documents. Information must normally be verified by at least two independent sources. Vigilance and fact-checking should be applied to information sources, particularly those researched on the internet. This may include confirming with an individual or organisation that they posted online material and satisfying yourself that it is accurate. Online sources, while useful, should not be the sole source of information and should be treated with appropriate caution.

## **4. Hear the other side**

It is a basic tenet of good and responsible journalism to put any critical or damaging claim or allegation to the subject before publication.

Where allegations are being made, the individual or organisation concerned should be given a fair opportunity to respond to the allegations before publication. Journalists should always describe the allegations in sufficient detail to enable an informed response. They should also give sufficient time for a response. The response should be reflected fairly and accurately. You may not get one. You may even get an emphatic denial which may give you pause for thought. Records should be kept of attempts to get a reply if one is not forthcoming.

There may be circumstances where getting a response is not feasible, practical or realistic. There must be strong reasons for believing that the subject matter is sufficiently newsworthy and in the public interest to justify publication in the absence of a response. In such cases, the Editor or another senior editorial figure should be consulted.

## **5. Opinions•**

Journalists have a right to trenchant opinions on matters of public interest. However, journalists have a duty to ensure that when they comment on a matter of public interest that such comment is based upon facts which are either set out in the article or could otherwise be known to the reader. You should also be able to prove those facts.

Writers of comment need to be aware that the rules about getting facts right apply to them as much as other writers. If relying on facts from other publications, always seek verification that they are true or that the circumstances have not changed.

## **6. Misleading readers**

Journalists should never distort known facts, present invented material as fact, or knowingly do anything to mislead our readers or audience.

Journalists should ensure that any digital editing of photographs does not distort the meaning of events, alter the impact of genuine material, or otherwise materially mislead readers. Headlines and introductions to stories should accurately represent the body of the story.

## **7. Researching online**

You should be cautious how you use the internet and social media for both sourcing and verifying material for a story in terms of trustworthiness, identification in the case of a photo/video and also the copyright related to material. Apply the same rigorous standards to verifying information on social media as elsewhere.

## **8. Accountability/corrections**

Journalists should be open to admitting mistakes. Where significant mistakes are highlighted, it is our policy to acknowledge those errors at the earliest opportunity in our Corrections and Clarifications columns. We also highlight corrections to online articles where it is appropriate to do so.

## **9. Privacy**

Privacy is a human right, protected as a personal right in the Irish Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights.

Journalists should respect privacy and should not infringe it without legally justified cause or reason. Private behaviour, correspondence and conversation should not be brought into the public domain unless it is of clear public interest. It is essential, in order to exercise a right of freedom of expression and information, that we work within a framework which respects an individual's privacy and treats people fairly while investigating, reporting on, commenting and commentating on matters which are in the public interest to report, comment or reveal.

Public persons are entitled to privacy. However, where a person holds public office, deals with public affairs, follows a public career, or has sought or obtained publicity for his activities, publication of relevant details of their private life and circumstances may be justifiable where the information revealed relates to the validity of the person's conduct, the credibility of their public statements, the value of their publicly expressed views or is otherwise in the public interest.

Individuals should not be photographed or filmed in places where they have a 'reasonable expectation of privacy' unless justified by the public interest. Each case must be judged on its merits. The location, while relevant, is not itself the sole test for an expectation of privacy. The context of the story may render a situation one where an expectation of privacy may not apply. Equally, being in a public place can give rise to an expectation of privacy where intrinsically personal matters are involved.

## **10. Reporting suffering and distress**

We must always balance the public interest in full and accurate reporting against the need to be compassionate and to avoid any unjustified infringement of privacy when we report accidents, disasters, disturbances or war, or instances where people are involved in

distressing situations. In cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries and approaches must be made with sympathy and discretion.

We should not report at funerals if the family has requested privacy. There must be a clear public interest if we decide to proceed against requests for privacy.

## **11. Children**

Journalists must always have regard for the vulnerability of children.

Journalists should seek the consent of parents or legal guardians or persons in similar positions – teachers etc – before interviewing children under 16. Any decision to proceed without parental consent is normally only editorially justified on the basis of a clear public interest, or the freedom of a child or young person to express themselves in non-contentious ways. The onus is on the journalist to establish an accurate age and judge whether the views expressed by the child would expose them to ridicule or abuse.

When photographing children under the age of 16, always bear in mind the context of the situation, consider whether it is likely to be in any way controversial. Under-16s must not be photographed or filmed on subjects about their welfare – or the welfare of other children – without the consent of their parent/guardian or someone in loco parentis.

Young people should be free to complete their time at school without unnecessary intrusion. The fame, notoriety or position of a parent or guardian must not be used as sole justification for publishing details of a child's private life.

## **12. Harassment**

Journalists must not engage in intimidation, harassment or persistent pursuit. They must not persist in questioning, phoning, pursuing or photographing people once asked to stop, unless there is a good reason not to do so. In this case, the decision must lie with the Editor after all the facts of the case have been attained.

## **13. Court cases**

The media serve a vital role in upholding the principle that justice must be done in public by acting as the 'eyes and ears' of the public in our reporting of cases. In doing so, we have a responsibility to report those proceeding fairly and accurately and with respect for the rights of those involved in court proceedings, including the right of accused persons to a presumption of innocence until proven guilty.

When writing about court cases involving children or any aspect of family law or sexual offences, be aware of the law and any specific restrictions. Sometimes writers who have not been at court will comment on these cases or bring them into related stories. It is always their ongoing responsibility to check on restrictions.

#### **14. Your use of social media**

See Appendix 1.

#### **15. Subterfuge / doorstepping**

Door-stepping should never be gratuitous and should be warranted by the story. For certain stories where there is a clear public interest and when dealing with allegations of serious criminal, fraudulent, unlawful or anti-social behaviour, it may be acceptable to use subterfuge. Subterfuge should be the minimum necessary in proportion to the subject matter. Any proposal to use subterfuge must be approved in advance by your Editor and the Deputy Publisher.

#### **16. Impartiality**

Journalists should seek to reflect all opinions by exploring a range of conflicting views. Journalists should be objective and even-handed in their approach.

Mediahuis will strive to reflect a wide range of opinion in its publications and explore a range of conflict of views to allow expression to its wide readership market. Mediahuis exercises its editorial freedom to produce content about any subject at any point on the spectrum of debate as long as there are good editorial reasons for so doing.

Mediahuis titles and websites will sometimes need to report on or interview people whose views may cause offence to our readers. This would be the subject of a clear decision from the Editor that the public interest outweighs the possible offence which may be caused. It is the policy of the titles to allow a forum for the expression of opposing views either through editorial columns or Letters to the Editor.

#### **17. Respect for minorities and diversity**

Mediahuis journalists should at all times be respectful of the ways in which stories may involve or affect people from minority groups in society and be mindful of the language used.

The fact that a person belongs to a minority group, e.g. by ethnicity or race, is not a relevant detail in every story. Equally, in some circumstances it may be a very important detail that requires careful consideration of how we approach the story.

**Slang words that refer to minority groups should only be used in rare situations and where editorially justified. Refer to the 'Mind your language' section below.**

## **18. Copy approval**

The general rule is that no one should be given the right to prior copy approval. Doing otherwise, no matter how trivial the subject matter of the article, impinges on the freedom of the press. On occasion, we may allow people to see copy or quotes but we are not required to change the copy. In all cases such as this, consult with the Editor or Deputy Publisher.

## **19. Mind your language**

We should never casually use words likely to offend in our journalism. Use swear words only when necessary – and in consultation with senior editors. The stronger the swear word, the more you should think about it. Avoid using in headlines, pull quotes, Tweets or standfirsts. Asterisks may be used where a particularly offensive word is deemed necessary to the story.

## **20. Suicide / attempted suicide**

When reporting suicide, care should be taken to avoid excessive detail about the method used. Please note that the term 'commit suicide' is considered offensive by some people. You should read and follow the media guidelines for reporting mental health and suicide at [www.headline.ie](http://www.headline.ie) See also and familiarise yourself with the Editors' Code of Practice of the Press Council

## **21. Reviewing products or services**

We should make every effort to ensure there is no element of unqualified 'plugging' when we review products or services. Reviews must be seen to be a service to the reader. Advertorial style material should be indicated. Negative reviews should be rigorously backed up by evidence.

## **22. Conflicts of interest**

There must never be any suggestion that personal, commercial, business, financial or other interests have influenced Mediahuis editorial decisions. Journalists have a duty to pay their own way. They should accept no free trips or gifts from sources other than nominal courtesies such as business lunches or seasonal gifts. Transparency is important and if in doubt run past your Editor.

We should not normally accept expenses paid trips unless they are the only way to cover a significant event or they are for travel articles or to speak at/address bona fide media or related conferences. Any proposal to accept an expenses paid trip must be referred to a senior editorial figure and approved in writing.

Under no circumstances should anyone working for Mediahuis accept personal benefits from suppliers or accept goods or services which could be construed as inducements.

These situations can be covered by explanatory letters and the gifts can be returned or redirected to appropriate charities.

Journalists are required to declare any personal interest or relationships which may affect their work. Interests should be declared on a Declaration of Personal Interest Form and given to the Deputy Publisher. In relation to particular stories, journalists must discuss any possible conflicts of interest with their Editor.

Journalists may not work without permission for any person or body except Mediahuis. Any payment must be approved by the Editor or Deputy Publisher. They must seek the approval of their Editor/Deputy Publisher for any work done with other departments in Mediahuis outside Editorial. The right to engage in freelance work for publications that compete with Mediahuis is subject to management approval in every case.

### **23. Business journalists**

Business and financial journalists are required to disclose all financial holdings or investments and any other financial interests or dealings by them and their family. Journalists should not write about shares or securities if they know that they, their partners or close family have a significant financial interest unless they have disclosed this information to their Editor or the Deputy Publisher.

Journalists must not use for their own profit any privileged information they receive in advance of its general publication, nor should they pass on such information to others.

To maintain their integrity, journalists should not speculate by buying and selling shares on a short-term basis if they have written about them recently or know that they will be doing so in the near future.



It is essential that financial journalists do not promote, or give the impression of promoting, any business or financial service. However, where editorially justified, references may be made to particular services, businesses or branded products. In some cases, it will be editorially relevant to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of a financial service or product. Financial journalists must always guard against the impression of promoting or plugging particular products or services.

The onus is on the journalist to let Mediahuis know if they have any interests or relationships which could be perceived as a conflict of interest.

#### **24. Confidential sources**

Quotes with names attached always carry more weight. Journalists have a moral and professional obligation to protect confidential sources when anonymity is a pre-condition for the story. Care should be taken to ensure that the identities of any confidential sources are protected and do not appear in any notes that might become the subject of a court order or can be seen by third parties. When we agree to protect the identity of the source, that identity will not be made known to anyone outside Mediahuis. Before any information is accepted without full attribution, however, reporters must make every reasonable effort to get it verified. This also applies to tip-offs from unknown or criminal sources where a journalist should exercise particular caution.

Efforts should be made to get the information elsewhere and, if possible in the context of the article, a reason for protecting the source's identity should be included in the story.

When our journalists undertake to protect sources, they must establish how far the protection is required: Is it understood that the writer could be challenged to identify the source in court? Will the source give evidence if the paper is sued?

#### **25. Note taking/recording**

Journalists should always seek to record or take accurate, reliable and where possible contemporaneous notes of all significant conversations and other relevant information. Any such notes or recordings should be safely retained. When anonymity is essential and has been offered, great care should be taken that no document, computer file or other record could identify a source.

#### **26. Publication of the decision of the Press Ombudsman**

When requested or required by the Press Ombudsman and/or the Press Council to do so, Mediahuis **titles** shall publish the Ombudsman's decision in relation to a complaint with due prominence in accordance with the publication guidelines specified by the Press Ombudsman.

We will also make such decisions available in the relevant section of our website.

## **27. Attribution**

Journalists should never use material from other publications without permission and credit. Where stories are 'rewrites' using material in other media, there should be proper accreditation and there should be no breach of copyright. Pictures should also be properly accredited in captions.

## **28. Payments**

In general, Mediahuis does not pay for stories, except from bona fide freelance sources. Written approval must be obtained from the Deputy Publisher in any rare exceptions.

Please note that:

- Payment or offers of payment for stories, pictures or information, which seek to exploit a particular crime or to glorify or glamorise crime in general, must not be made directly or via agents to convicted or confessed criminals or to their associates – who may include family, friends and colleagues. The only exception to this is if it is approved by the Managing Editor and this would only be done if clearly in the public interest and unobtainable without such a payment.
- No payments should be made to serving public officials.

## **29. Data protection**

Journalists have a right to gather information and process it for journalistic purposes and data protection law recognises the right to do so (Article 85 of the General Data Protection Regulation and Section 43 of the Data Protection Act 2018). This right should not be abused – the information gathered should not be used unless for the public interest and must be processed securely through our systems, processes and procedures. It should not be given to third parties unless for legitimate journalistic reasons.

Journalists must comply with Mediahuis data protection policies.

Reasonable steps should be taken to ensure any personal data is processed securely and to prevent it being lost, stolen or misused. Do not leave story notes or other documents containing personal data unsecured on your desk overnight. Steps should also be taken to delete personal data that is no longer needed.

*Sometimes data protection is mistakenly used as a reason to deny journalists information. Remember that the law covers personal data, not all the data, and even personal data can be lawfully released in some circumstances.*

### **30. The right to erasure**

Also known as, the ‘right to be forgotten’, provides individuals with the right to have personal data erased or amended in particular circumstances.

Our website constitutes a public archive of the contemporaneous recording of events – what happened, how, why, who was involved, public reaction and commentary. To alter this archive in a piecemeal manner risks compromising its integrity and trustworthiness.

In general, Mediahuis will not accede to requests for article removal unless exceptional circumstance exists.

All such requests must be made [through the Privacy Portal](#).

### **31. The public interest**

The press has a right to freedom of expression and to impart and convey information freely. In many circumstances, the press will invoke the public interest as a reason for reporting. The public interest includes, but is not confined to:

- Detecting or exposing crime or serious impropriety
- Exposing significantly anti-social behaviour
- Exposing corruption or injustice
- Exposing significant incompetence or negligence
- Protecting public health and safety
- Preventing the public from being misled
- Disclosing information that assists people to better understand or make decisions on matters of public importance

There is also a public interest in freedom of expression in itself. Also, it should be noted that exceptional public interest will need to be shown in cases involving children.

## Appendix 1

Social media plays a vital role in our journalism and is more often than not a force for good. We encourage journalists to use social platforms and there they can promote their work, provide updates, gather and curate information, develop sources, engage with readers, experiment with new forms of storytelling – and have fun.

But there are also risks. The credibility of our newsroom can be undermined if journalists do not adhere to the standards of what we publish online and in print or are perceived as biased. Journalists can also face abuse or threats on social media.

The following are crucial points to note:

- In social media posts, journalists should not expressly promote political views, endorse political candidates, make offensive comments, endorse products (unless an editorial review) or commercial companies, or do anything else that undermines our journalistic reputation.
- If a member of the public criticises your work online, please be thoughtful in your response. If the person is aggressive or abusive, do not respond. You have the option of blocking the person and can report it to your line manager.
- If you feel threatened, inform your line manager immediately.
- Content should not be published on social media before it is published on one of our platforms – unless cleared by the Editor.
- Avoid using vulgar language or abusive language.

The following guidance from the New York Times for their journalists is useful:

If you don't know whether a social media post conforms to our standards, ask yourself these questions:

1. Would you express similar views in an article on our platforms?
2. Would someone who reads your post have grounds for believing that you are biased on a particular issue?
3. If readers see your post and notice that you're one of our journalists, would that affect their view of our news coverage as fair and impartial?
4. Could your post hamper your colleagues' ability to effectively do their jobs?
5. If someone were to look at your entire social media feed, including links and retweets, would they have doubts about your ability to cover news events in a fair and impartial way?