

The Journalistic Code

PREAMBLE

Since 1942, the Voice of America has built a global reputation as a consistently reliable source of news and information. Accuracy, balance, comprehensiveness, and objectivity are the qualities audiences around the world expect of VOA. These standards are legally mandated in the VOA Charter (Public Laws 94-350 and 103-415). Because of them, VOA is a vital information lifeline to nations and peoples around the world.

SUMMARY

Adhering to the principles outlined in the Charter, VOA is accurate and objective in all of its reporting, programming, online and social media content. VOA staff avoid imbalance or bias in their news reports. VOA does not speak for the U.S. government. VOA staff do not accept treatment or assistance from U.S. government officials or agencies that is more favorable or less favorable than that of staff of private sector news organizations.

VOA pursues its mission by producing accurate, balanced and comprehensive reporting, programming, on line and social media content for a global audience, particularly to those who are denied access to open and free media. VOA is a powerful and trusted source of information for all those who believe in freedom and democracy.

THE CODE

All staff who report, manage, edit, and prepare content at VOA must follow these principles:

Sourcing and Attribution

- Whenever possible, a source should be on the record -- someone who is willing to be named and quoted. If a source refuses to be named, the information he or she provides should include the fullest possible description of the source's position.
- An unnamed source must have verifiable and first-hand knowledge of the story.
- Before using an unnamed source, VOA journalists must be certain that there is no other way to get the information on the record. A request for confidentiality should come from the source and not be suggested by the correspondent or producer. However, your editor has a right to know the name of the source if asked.
- Once you agree to treat a source anonymously, you still should include the fullest possible description of that source's position.
- Proper attribution is a fundamental element of good journalism. When VOA quotes information from news

stories, editorials/opinion pieces, or social media posts, it is mandatory to credit the media organization, NGO or other outlet. Not including that information can open VOA to possible claims of copyright infringement and/or plagiarism.

- Plagiarism is illegal and unethical and strikes at the very heart of our journalistic mission. It can cost the individual and VOA its credibility and reputation, and will not be tolerated. We do not present others' work as our own.

Accuracy and Balance

- Accuracy and balance are VOA's highest priorities. It is essential that accuracy takes priority over speed in our reporting, programming and online/social media presence. VOA has a legal obligation to present a comprehensive, reliable and unbiased description of events. VOA corrects errors or omissions in its reports, broadcasts, websites and social media sites at the earliest opportunity.

- VOA rejects efforts by foreign and domestic special interest groups to use its radio and TV broadcasts, websites and social media sites as platforms for their own views. Regardless of the medium, the views of a single party must be challenged if alternative opinions are unrepresented.
- Whenever VOA reports a charge or accusation made by an individual or a group against another, or presents one side of a controversial issue, a response and/or balancing information should be included in the initial report. If the response cannot be obtained by deadline, or the subject of the charge declines to comment that will be included in the initial VOA report. The response and/or balancing material will be broadcast and posted on line as soon as it is available.

Fairness

- VOA always presents a full and fair account of events. VOA staff will evaluate information on its merits, and will not support violence, sensationalism, personal value judgment, or misleading emphases in its reporting.
- VOA journalists avoid the use of unattributed negative terms or labels to describe persons or organizations, except when the individuals and groups use those labels to describe themselves or their activities.
- VOA journalists will not fabricate, distort, or dramatize an event. At no time should information or audio/video content be used to mislead the audience.

Context and Comprehensiveness

- VOA presents a comprehensive account of America and the world, and always puts events in context. That means constant vigilance to reflect America's and the world's political, geographical, cultural, ethnic, religious and social diversity. VOA's reporting represents the best effort to seek out and present a comprehensive account of the event or trend being covered.
- VOA staff avoid using political or other biases in their reporting, programming, websites and social media sites. Music will not be used to make editorial statements. All those preparing news and feature reports, programs, online and social media content must avoid any action or statement that conveys the appearance of partisanship.

Social Media

- In social media and in other public spaces, you are a VOA journalist. It is critical that you are fair, impartial and objective in all public spaces.
- If you take a controversial position or make a controversial comment it can reflect poorly on you and the agency. It could lead the audience to believe that we are untrustworthy and unable to fairly cover both sides of a controversial story. VOA has spent 75 years building its reputation, and you have spent your career building yours. To keep that trust intact we must adhere to a high standard of independence and objectivity.
- It is okay for VOA staff to follow or "friend" individuals or interest groups on either side of an issue. Paying attention to what both sides have to say is critical to getting as much information as possible on an issue. But never endorse only one side or the other by "liking" a cause or political figure, and make sure you follow all sides of an issue.
- Adding comments from social media to VOA reporting is acceptable as long as the source of the comment is clearly identified and it clearly reflects audience opinion. Balance opinions to provide a fair picture of public sentiment, and contextualize those opinions with the larger story.

Procedures

- VOA staff always travel on regular, non-diplomatic passports, and rely no more and no less than private sector correspondents on U.S. missions abroad for support, as set out in the guidelines for VOA correspondents.
- VOA staff assist managers whose duty is to ensure that no VOA employee works for any other U.S. government agency, any official media of another state, or any international organization, without specific VOA authorization.
- VOA staff adhere strictly to copyright laws and agency regulations and always credit the source when quoting, paraphrasing, or excerpting from other news organizations, websites, social media sites, or any print media.
- VOA staff carry out their work with the utmost professionalism and recognize that their conduct both on and off the job reflects on the work of the Voice of America community. Professionalism and respect for the people and the issues we cover and report about is vital to enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of the Voice of America.