GUIDELINES ON JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS AND PRACTICES

These guidelines represent a distillation of the standards and practices that have helped reporters and current affairs producers in the past. They are not meant to be comprehensive, and so producers are encouraged to seek the advice or guidance of WJCT Management when confronted with specific cases.

We recognize that many of these standards and practices will appear quite familiar to you or will be based simply on common sense. Still, we believe it is valuable to share this document with you and, of course, to invite your thoughts and comments, for it is self-evident that no set of rules or standards can insure the result by itself. The guidelines are, for the most part, self-enforcing. The greater part lies wholly within the producer and the knowledge held by that producer.

The guidelines are divided into two Sections: Section I addresses standards and practices to be observed in the research, development, and production of public affairs programs; Section II outlines the major considerations for editing and post-production. Following Sections I and II, you’ll find a general discussion of Fairness and a Legal addendum. Where the term “producer” is used, we mean to include reporters or other staff persons with day-to-day editorial control of a program or program segment.

These guidelines may be modified from time to time, and your comments will be helpful toward that end.

IN RESEARCHING AND FUNDING

1. Consult on Conflict of Interest Problems.
2. Obey the Law.
3. Consult Before Employing Hidden Cameras or Eavesdropping Devices.
4. Avoid Misrepresentation.
5. Seek Unrestricted Access and Use. Identify all Restrictions or Conditions on Access or Information.
6. Avoid Paying for Testimony.
7. Consult Before staging or Recreating Events.
8. Do Not Accept Gifts.

1. Consult on Conflict of Interest Problems

Any person on a documentary assignment who has a material interest -- whether a financial or other personal stake -- in a subject under documentary examination shall make that interest known to WJCT. It is the producer’s responsibility to monitor any interest of these hired to carry out station projects.
Where the matter under examination may place the producer or other member of his or her team in possession of information which could lead to personal gain, especially in the case of “insider” knowledge of a publicly traded company, acting on that knowledge before the broadcast is prohibited.

2. **Obey the Law**

The obligations of producers are not different from those of a citizen when it comes to obeying the law except as noted herein. It is particularly important that the producer not violate the rights of others in the pursuit of a story.

Knowledge that a crime has been committed or is going to be committed, which endangers the person or property of others must be reported promptly to the appropriate public official.

Exceptions to the duty to report may be called for when the producer is investigating the misconduct of a public official who would have knowledge of it if such a report were made. In such a case the producer must consult with Senior Management before proceeding.

3. **Hidden Cameras or Eavesdropping Devices**

Electronic eavesdropping and the use of hidden cameras and recording devices should not be undertaken without WJCT Management approval. Ethically, WJCT is fundamentally opposed to the use of such techniques and feels that their use is justified only by the most extraordinary circumstances. There are, moreover, strong legal impediments to surreptitious recording/listening.

This does not apply to situations where a telephone conversation is recorded with the consent of both parties (one is sufficient in some jurisdictions) for purposes of accuracy.

4. **Avoid Misrepresentation**

In general, when a person’s participation or cooperation is sought in the production of a documentary or news report, that person must be apprised of the fact, and know why he or she is being asked to participate.

Material gathered under false pretenses may not carry the same implication of consent that otherwise applies to information freely given to a journalist. The use of a false identity may be justified, but only in the rarest of circumstances, and may not be made without advance approval by WJCT Management.

In other cases, however, an important story cannot be done without the producer’s withholding his or her own identity. Such cases are still exceptional and should be discussed in advance with station management.
5. **Seek Unrestricted Access and Use. Identify All Restrictions or Conditions on Access or Information**

The preferred case for public affairs programs occurs when access to a place or to a subject through interview is granted without any restriction or condition. Any question may be asked, none is rehearsed or identified beforehand, and no limit or condition is placed upon the uses made of the answers given. It is reasonable in exchange for such unrestricted use to explain the purpose of the inquiry and even to the extent known the general context in which the particular interviewee will appear. In special circumstances it may be desirable to provide questions ahead of time. For example, fairness requires that the subject of an investigative interview have the opportunity to check his or her records.

In some circumstances it may be necessary to agree to further conditions or restrictions to gain access, although agreement to such conditions should be the rare exception. When conditions or restrictions on use are part of the contract for access, the conditions should be so stated or explained on the program, and permission should be sought from WJCT Management when circumstances make this impossible.

6. **Avoid Paying for Testimony**

It is WJCT Management Policy not to pay for those interviewed for programs. Not only does it establish a bad precedent, but the credibility of any interviewee who is paid is rightly called into question.

7. **Consult Before Staging or Recreating Events**

The use of recreation can be an effective device, but there is a serious danger that the viewer will be confused by the presentation of something as real that is unreal. Therefore, where it may be appropriate to re-enact or stage an event, it must be labeled clearly and unmistakably as such.

Use of the “docudrama” or dramatized documentary form for an entire program or large portions of a program carries with it a major risk of viewer skepticism. This arises from the fact that there is inherently less believability associated with dramatizations, and that public criticism of this form has increased in recent years. Thus, it is a form to be avoided if other standard documentary techniques are available. There may, however, be unusual instances where no other technique can effectively convey the truth, e.g., dramatizing a trial transcript where the principals are unavailable.

In dramatizing a transcript, the record may be edited, but should otherwise be presented verbatim. This fact should be emphasized in the presentation, and transitional or continuity material should be clearly distinguishable from the verbatim dramatization.
8. Do Not Accept Gifts

Producers should pay their own way and be beholden to no one. Where, for special reasons, their costs are or must be borne by another, acknowledgment of that service within the program or the credits is necessary.

IN EDITING AND POST PRODUCTION

1. Edit to Compress, Not to Distort.
2. Ensure appropriate Use of Music/Effects.
3. Consult on Use of Obscene or Objectionable Materials.
4. Identify Sources.
5. Attribute All Non-Original Materials To Their Sources.
6. Do Not Pre-Screen for Interested Parties.
7. Do Not Show Out-takes or Notes to Outside Parties.

9. Edit to Compress, Not to Distort

In no area of documentary and news production is there greater reliance on the honesty of the individual producer than in editing.

It should be the objective of the editing process to collect and order all significant facts in a manner that fairly portrays the reality.

10. Limit the Use of Music/Effects

The use of music and/or effects to create impressions that are not found in reality can be objectionable. Music, for example, which editorializes or over dramatizes can detract from the program’s credibility. Effects and/or music should not be used if the impression created for the viewer would be distorted or inaccurate.

In general, music/effects should be appropriate to and in keeping with the narrative line, and while this area is extremely subjective, the producer should guard against the temptation to use music/effects to communicate something that could not be supported in the script.

11. Consult on Use of Obscene or Objectionable Materials

In general, obscenities and materials offensive to general taste or manners (e.g., extreme violence, racial epithets, strong language, and nudity) should be avoided where inclusion is not necessary to an understanding of the matter at hand.

When it is judged that the exclusion of such material would have the effect of significantly distorting an important reality, the program should carry appropriate warnings to the viewer.
12. **Identify Sources**

As part of the cardinal responsibility of the producer to present all significant facts, those who speak to camera or who are invoked as authority for a statement of fact must be identified.

Identity in this case must also include relevant information about the source. It would be misleading, for example, to include the name of the person speaking and omit the fact that he or she was doing so from within a cell on murderers’ row. By extension, any special interest motivating the speaker or interviewee should be made known in the program.

Use of an anonymous source may be required by special circumstances. It may be a condition of access to information that is of special relevance. It may be required to protect a person from harm. In any case, it should be resorted to last, when no other route to the same information is possible.

When the identity of the source cannot be made known, the reasons for anonymity should be given, and as much information about the sources should be given short of identification.

Where it is not possible to indicate a source’s special interest without identifying the source, such a source should not be used.

13. **Attribute All Non-original Materials to Their Sources**

With the exception of stock footage material, which may also need to be labeled as “library footage,” all materials included in a program but not actually produced by the producer for the program should be clearly labeled as to its source. Identification may also need to include dates, when they are a significant factor. Identification at the time such footage is shown is preferred.

14. **Do Not Pre-screen for Interested Parties**

The broadcast should be the first publication of a documentary. Pre-screening for reviewers is an established practice, but that is the only recognized exception to the rule.

Only members of the production team, the producing organization, and others who, at the invitation of the producer, can act as independent consultants should be permitted to view rough cuts, fine cuts, or any segments of the program before completion.

15. **Do Not Show Out-takes or Notes to Outside Parties**

It is vital that out-takes and notes not be shared with outside parties (e.g., police, interested parties, critics) unless compelled by legal action. However, the sale of out-takes or sharing of research material with other broadcasters and journalists may be called for either by contract or mutual agreement. Whenever the question arises it should be brought to WJCT Management’s attention.
FAIRNESS

No list of specific guidelines has much meaning if the producer possesses a lack of sensitivity to issues of fairness. The pursuit of the truth is journalism’s main objective and by extension is the main objective of any public affairs program. A sense of fairness is critical if the pursuit of truth is to have credibility and integrity; truth is an elusive combination of fact and opinion, of reason and experience. To ask for the viewers’ trust requires an implicit promise: that we present information after a good-faith effort to arrive as close to the truth as is humanly possible. A good-faith effort, in turn, depends on a sense of fairness towards the subject matter and the people in the program.

Appearance of intent to be fair is a strength, not a weakness. If the intent is seen to be fair, whatever message the program carries is reinforced. When a program seems to the viewer to be unfair, it defeats itself. Nothing will so quickly destroy any journalistic endeavor as will a reputation that it is unfair. On a controversial subject, the ideal program is one that is persuasive, but not argumentative.

Specifically, fairness means that a producer will:

• approach stories with an open and skeptical mind and a determination through extensive research to become acquainted with a wide range of viewpoints;
• try to keep personal bias and opinion from unduly influencing the pursuit of a story;
• carefully examine contrary information at any point in a production;
• exercise care in checking the accuracy and credibility of all information received, especially as it may relate to accusations of wrongdoing;
• give individuals or organizations which are the subject of attack the opportunity to respond to those attacks;
• represent fairly the words and actions of the people portrayed;
• inform individuals who are the subject of an investigative interview in advance about the general areas of questioning and, if important for accuracy, will give those individuals an opportunity to check the records;
• try to present all significant facts that a viewer will need to understand what is being seen, including appropriate information to frame the program;
• always be prepared to assist in correcting errors.

Where there are conflicting viewpoints or opinions on subjects treated within the program, fairness does not require equal time being accorded to conflicting opinions. However, it does require the acknowledgment of, and responsible, if brief, statement of those conflicting opinions.

In making a good-faith effort to discover and report the truth, the public affairs producer performs a vital function. He or she serves the public’s right to know, and guards the right of a free press to discuss, question, and challenge the actions of our government and of our public and private institutions. Producers who demonstrate a lack of sensitivity to fairness in carrying out
this function jeopardize the public's trust and risk being seen as prosecutors or propagandists for special interests.

**LEGAL ADDENDUM**

The Federal Communication Commission has three rules which have implications for any current affairs series: the “Fairness Doctrine,” “Personal Attack,” and “Equal Time.”

1. **Fairness Doctrine.** While the Fairness Doctrine is not currently required by the FCC, its content is still worth noting. The Fairness Doctrine stipulates that in presenting “controversial issues of public importance,” broadcasters provide a reasonable opportunity for the expression of all opinions on the issues. Adherence to good journalistic standards should result in compliance with this rule. The definition of “controversial issues of public importance” is subject to a case-by-case analysis.

2. **Personal Attack Rule.** If during the presentation of a “controversial issue of public importance,” qualities such as “honesty, character, integrity” or similar qualities of any “identifiable” person or group are attacked, the broadcaster must offer a reasonable opportunity for the attacked person to respond. Just as the definitions of “controversial issue” and “public importance” vary and are subject to a case-by-case analysis, the definitions of “identifiable” and such qualities as “honesty, character, and integrity” are subject to the same vagaries.

3. **Equal Time.** If a legally qualified candidate for public office appears in a broadcast, opponents have the right to demand equal time. While some appearances might come within an exception to the rule if they are incidental to the subject of a bone fide news documentary, producers should be aware that appearances might trigger equal time requests. The Senior Vice President, TV/FM should be informed about any person appearing in the program who is a candidate for public office.

Concerns about these rules are generally a matter for executive attention because of the extremely complicated and convoluted manner in which they have been interpreted.

It is important that these rules not create a chilling effect on the pursuit of the documentary story, if carried on within the boundaries of the other journalistic standards and practices enumerated here. However, these rules may raise obligations on the part of WJCT, which could be unduly burdensome. Therefore, a producer should immediately advise WJCT Management if he or she has reason to believe that material to be included in the program will raise an obligation under these rules.