

Module 4:

Journalism and ethics

At the end of this module you will understand:

- How to follow ethical guidelines in your reporting
- How to avoid charges of plagiarism and defamation
- The difference between copyright and creative commons



Flore is one of the residents at Chagata Children's Home in Abidjan, for children living with or affected by HIV, Cote d'Ivoire

Respect for your sources, your subjects and yourself

As seen in the chapter on writing for change, the written word can be powerful. So it is important to respect your sources – the people you interview, the reports and other documents – that inform your writing. Also, to remember that you can be legally held to account for the words you write so you need to understand plagiarism and defamation, and how to avoid both.

And it's not just about avoiding legal difficulties. The best way to undermine both your credibility and the goals connected to what you are writing about is to ignore ethical conduct in your reporting. If you are writing to promote change and are challenging widely held values and people in power, your writing will be held up to even greater scrutiny. This chapter outlines the standards required of citizen journalists and representatives of the Key Correspondents network.

Work must be original

Any work you submit in your name must be wholly your own work. This doesn't mean you can't include information within your story which comes from other people, however, you must clearly attribute such information to its original source to avoid plagiarism.

Plagiarism is copying another person's work (whether in part or whole) and representing it as your own. It can also include thoughts, ideas or expressions. Often the rules and definitions of plagiarism are unclear, so the best way to avoid it is to attribute direct quotes by using quotation marks and make sure you cite your sources, preferably including a web link, when referring to reports.

You are not required to cite source material if it is considered factual information that is common knowledge, unless you are using the exact words of the source, then you must use quotes and cite the source.



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Work must be accurate

Submitting work that you know to be untrue, inaccurate or misleading seriously undermines your reputation and the reputation of the Key Correspondents network and must be avoided at all costs. Unknowingly submitting work that contains inaccurate or misleading information is not an acceptable excuse and it is a sign that sources have not been checked correctly.

Sources must be fully informed and consenting

Everyone is entitled to respect for his or her private and family life. Before interviewing or photographing a subject they must be fully informed how their words and images may be used and have given their consent. It is unacceptable to conduct an interview or photograph individuals in private places without their informed consent.

You must not engage in intimidation, harassment or persistent pursuit in order to get a story.

In cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries and approaches must be made with sympathy and discretion and your work handled sensitively.

You have a moral obligation to protect sources of information that request to have their identities kept confidential. This can easily be done by using pseudonyms and ensuring no identifying features are included in the story or photo. It is unacceptable to put your source at risk by identifying them.

It is particularly important when reporting on issues such as sexual assault or gender issues that you do not identify the individual without informed consent. Informed consent means checking the person fully understands how and where their words or image may be used.

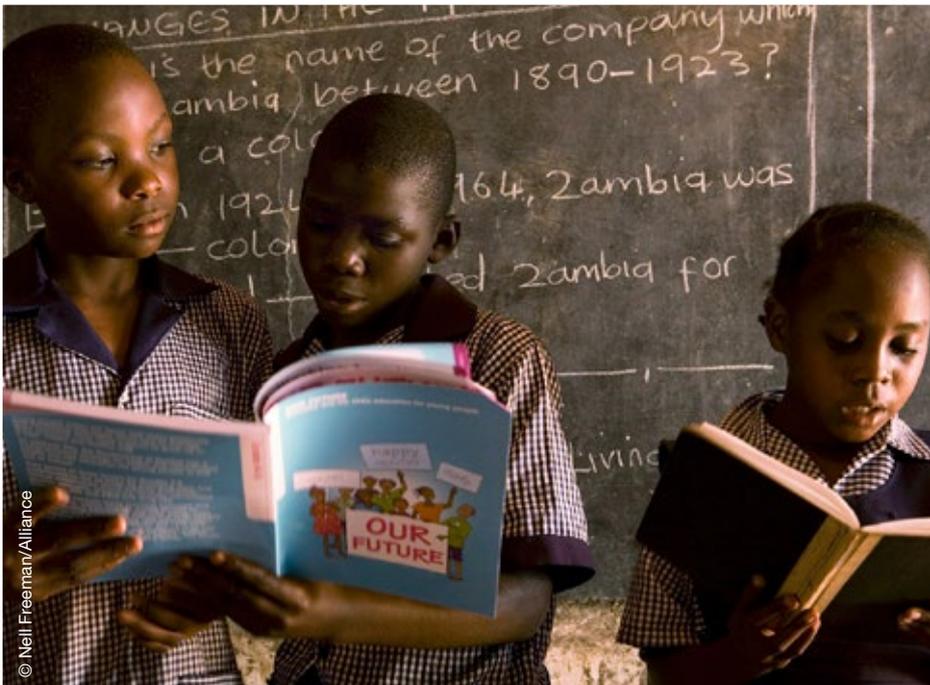
A child under 16 must not be interviewed or photographed on issues involving their own or another child's welfare unless a custodial parent or similarly responsible adult is present.

You must not, even if legally free to do so, identify children under 16 who are victims or witnesses in cases involving sex offences. Care must be taken that nothing in your report implies the relationship between the accused abuser and the child.

If you are ever unsure as to how to work to these standards or need advice on ethical conduct contact the editor and coordinator of the Key Correspondents network.

Above left: In South Sudan, Betty Scholar (with her niece) struggles to find any other job than sex work

Above: In Senegal, sex workers arrive for the morning clinic at the maternité polyclinique de Rufisque (2007)



In Chipata, Zambia, students at Hillside Basic School attend one of their regular classes in sexuality and health

Work must not be defamatory

Defamation is a false statement that damages the reputation of an individual, business, product, group, government, religion or nation. There are two types of defamation: libel and slander. Libel is defamation that is written and slander is spoken.

You can avoid being prosecuted for defamation by always getting your facts right. Make sure the claims you make can be proven and don't repeat hearsay, especially in print. Also avoid exaggeration and innuendo.

If a source you have spoken to makes a statement that is potentially damaging to a reputation, but their quote is central to your story it is important to clearly attribute this as an opinion. You should also provide further evidence to the validity of this claim, if appropriate, and include the opposing view to balance this statement out.

Exercise one

Consider the following paragraphs. Where do you think the author might run into trouble?

Last year saw a huge increase in the amount of Global Fund money coming into our country to ensure that drugs are available to treat HIV. Unfortunately this has not resulted in increased access to medicines, but rather several government officials who have started building mansions and sending their children to expensive universities overseas.

There have even been instances where clinics were bought with Global Fund money and then subsequently closed down and the properties rented out to other businesses. Money hungry individuals have taken advantage of both the compassionate funds provided and poor patients that need health services.

1. Would an author be vulnerable to being accused of libel by the way this story is written?
2. What evidence would you need and how would you write the story to avoid being prosecuted for defamation?

Work should follow a code of ethics

Morality is broadly defined as a set of rules by which a society agrees to live. Moral statements are unequivocal, and ‘to kill is wrong’, or ‘to steal is wrong’, or ‘to do good for other people is right’, are all examples of moral statements.

Ethics is a related but different notion – here, rules of morality are applied in practice. Ethical questions are often based on whether or not a moral rule can be challenged. Debates around euthanasia are a prime example. The ethical question here is: ‘to kill is wrong, but in this case, might it be the preferable option, given that the person is in a coma, and will never wake up?’. Responses will likely be in two camps – those who believe moral principles should never be broken, and those who believe that if the end justifies the means then in this case euthanasia is the best option.

Journalists must consider the ethics they stand by when crafting their story. Here are some ethical questions for you to consider:

- Is it okay to investigate the private life of a public person and reveal something personal without their consent? Why or why not?
- Do citizen journalists have to adhere to a code of ethics? As you aren’t being paid for your reporting, does it have to be ethical?

As citizen journalism is an emerging field, there are no set ethical guidelines as in formal journalism.

However, one of the worst things for a reporter – professional or citizen journalist – is to have their credibility undermined. It pays to follow a code of ethics.

Citizen journalists may not be paid, but they still have an obligation to their communities and wider society to be ethical in their reporting and raising the voices of people who don’t always have an opportunity to be heard.

Understanding copyright and creative commons

Copyright is a way to protect ‘original works of authorship’ of published and unpublished work. It allows control over the ability to reproduce, modify, distribute, display or perform the work. Copyright locks down a work and makes it illegal to modify or use without permission. There is no ‘international copyright’ but most countries will respect and protect copyrighted work.

In the age of the internet, many people have found copyright to be limiting and an alternative licensing scheme was created, called ‘creative commons’. It provides an author greater flexibility in granting permissions and allowing greater freedom for non-commercial use. However, it’s important to remember that there are different creative commons licenses and you should visit their website (creativecommons.org) if you want to create one for your work.

If you are interested in modifying or using another author’s work within your own, it’s important to check how it’s licensed. If it’s copyrighted, the terms will be quite strict and you will need to get direct permission from the author. If it’s creative commons, you should check the terms of the license on the creative commons website.



Sulong works on a plantation which employs people who use drugs, Malaysia



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In Zambia, students walk home from Chiwoko school following a day of lessons, one of which was sexuality and health

Ethical check list

- Tell the truth and don't make things up or guess if you're not sure
- Get the names of your sources correct (spelling and title)
- Make sure you have informed consent from your sources
- Respect anyone's wish for confidentiality
- Get facts and statistics right and provide web links
- Distinguish between opinion and fact
- Don't plagiarise – always attribute copy and ideas that are not yours
- Be aware of the potential damage of your story
- Use facts to back up the argument, especially when it is critical

Exercise two

1. What is plagiarism?
2. What is the impact of plagiarising someone else's work?
3. Is it ever okay to take someone else's words and use them in your writing?
4. When do you need to cite sources?
5. How do you cite sources?
6. What are the issues around accuracy?
7. What is informed consent?
8. How would you proceed if a key source for your story was a 16 year old, illiterate sex worker and she seemed nervous about talking to a reporter?
9. What is defamation?
10. What would you do if you were worried something may be defamatory but it's proving difficult to check your facts and your editor is pressing you to meet a deadline?