

**THE SIERRA LEONE ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS (SLAJ)
CODE OF ETHICS**

This SLAJ Code of Ethics is developed and adopted by the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) in 2016.

PREAMBLE

The SLAJ Code of Ethics is to address the ethical issues¹ facing Sierra Leone's journalism. It draws inspiration and conforms to most of the principles drawn from other Codes of Ethics and international best practices. It is to ensure that its members adhere to the highest ethical standards, professional competence and good behaviour in performing their duties. This Code is to provide a guide to professional media practice, and is therefore applicable to all members of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists.

We recognize that the Code may not address all the ethical issues to help both seasoned professionals and new journalists to hold themselves accountable for professional work. We, however, believe that the Code provides a frame of reference to the SLAJ National Executive, the Disciplinary Committee and members of the association when it becomes necessary to initiate disciplinary action against any member who flouts any Article of the Code.

MISSION

To defend freedom of the media, freedom of expression and information, uphold the ethics of journalism and exemplary standards of professional practice.

VISION

To have efficient and effective media institutions that will serve as powerful forces for the betterment of the nation through the dissemination of accurate and objective information, a constant quest for improved standards and techniques of journalism, and work towards the attainment of media self-regulation in Sierra Leone.

CORE VALUES

- Freedom of Expression and the Media
- Responsibility
- Credibility
- Accountability and
- Transparency

Conscious of our mission, vision, core values, responsibilities and duties as journalists, we, journalists in Sierra Leone, subscribe and give to ourselves this Code of Ethics. It is the duty of every journalist to adhere to and observe the provisions in the Code as set out in the various articles.

¹ They are the provisions contained in the Articles and Sub-articles listed below in this Code.

ARTICLE 1: FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

- Journalists shall at all times strive to uphold and defend the right of freedom of expression and information, the principle of media freedom and responsibility, and the right of the public to be informed.
- Journalists shall strive to employ open, honest and ethical means in the gathering and dissemination of information. Ethical journalism means taking responsibility for one's work and explaining one's decisions to the public.
Journalists must fully realize their personal responsibility for everything they publish or broadcast in their newspapers, radio or television stations or send to a news agency or on Social Media. They should not distort, falsify information or documents or misrepresent facts.
- A journalist shall obtain information, photographs and illustration only by straightforward means. The use of other means can be justified only by overriding considerations of the public interest.

ARTICLE 2: RESPECT FOR NATIONAL VALUES, PUBLIC INTEREST² AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

- Journalists shall help to promote national unity, universal principles of human rights, democracy, justice, equity, and peace.
- Journalists shall not publish or broadcast information promoting, supporting or encouraging violence, incitement or hatred against religious or ethnic minorities and the socially excluded, including persons with disabilities.
- Journalists serve democracy and the public interest by reporting the truth. Defending the public's interest includes promoting the free flow of information, exposing crime or wrongdoing, protecting public health and safety, and preventing the public from being misled. The public's need for information should be balanced against potential harm or discomfort.
- In collecting and disseminating information, journalists shall bear in mind their responsibility to the public at large and the various interests in society.
- Media owners, publishers, and media practitioners shall not suppress or distort information about which the public has a right to know because of pressure or influence from advertisers or others who may have a corporate, political or advocacy interest in the media institution concerned.
- Journalists shall serve the public interest, and put the needs of their audience – readers, listeners or viewers – at the forefront of their newsgathering decisions.

² The welfare or well-being of the general *public*; appeal or relevance to the general populace: a news story of *public interest*.

ARTICLE 3: TRANSPARENCY/ACCOUNTABILITY

- Journalists shall not conceal their identities, including when seeking information through social media.
- Journalists shall be accountable to the public for the fairness and reliability of their reporting.

ARTICLE 4: TRUTH AND FACTS

- Respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist.
- It is the primary duty of journalists to adhere to the truth, to report and interpret the news with scrupulous honesty.
- In pursuance of this duty, the journalist shall at all times defend and abide by the principles of freedom in the honest collection and publication of news, and of the right of fair comment and criticism.
The duty of every journalist is to write and report the truth, bearing in mind his/her duty to serve the public.
- Journalists shall clearly distinguish between comments, opinions, conjecture and fact.

ARTICLE 5: ACCURACY, FAIRNESS AND BALANCE

- Factual, accurate, balanced and fair reporting shall be the ultimate objective of good journalism and the basis of earning public trust, confidence and respectability.
- Journalists shall be disciplined in their efforts to verify all facts and refrain from publishing inaccurate and misleading information.
- Journalists shall make adequate enquiries and crosscheck their facts before publication or broadcast.
- Journalists shall take responsibility for the accuracy of their work, and remember that neither speed nor format excuses inaccuracy.
- Journalists shall provide context, take special care not to misrepresent or oversimplify in promoting, previewing or summarizing a story.
- Journalists shall make sure they retain the original context of all quotations or clips, and strive to convey the original tone. The reporting and editing shall not change the meaning of a statement or exclude important qualifiers.

ARTICLE 6: RIGHT OF REPLY/RETRACTION/CORRECTION/REJOINDER

- Journalists are bound to rectify willingly any news, which after further investigation may subsequently be found not to be authentic or accurate.
- When journalists make a mistake, whether in fact or in context, and regardless of the platform, they shall correct it promptly and in a transparent manner, acknowledging the nature of the error.

- When inaccurate information is inadvertently published, an opportunity to reply and prompt correction shall be made with due prominence.
- Journalists shall hold the right of reply as a cardinal rule of practice and an apology shall be published whenever appropriate.

ARTICLE 7: COPYRIGHT/PLAGIARISM

- Journalist shall not copy, wholesale or in part, other people's work without attribution and/or consent. To do so will constitute professional misconduct.
- Where a journalist reproduces a work, be it in print, broadcast, art work or design, proper acknowledgement shall be accorded the author in line with the provisions of Sierra Leone's Copyright Act of 2011.

ARTICLE 8: PRIVACY

- The public has a right to know about its institutions and the people who are elected or hired to serve its interests, but people also have a right to privacy. There are inevitable conflicts between the right to privacy, and the rights of all citizens to be informed about matters of public interest. Each situation shall be judged in light of common sense, humanity and relevance.
- As a general rule, a journalist shall respect the privacy of individuals and their families unless the public interest is at stake.
Publishing of such information about an individual as mentioned above shall be deemed justifiable only if it is directed at:
 - i. Exposing crime or serious misdemeanour;
 - ii. Exposing anti-social conduct;
 - iii. Protecting public health, morality and safety;
 - iv. Preventing the public from being misled by some statement or action of the individual concerned.
- Journalists shall report only information in which the public has a legitimate interest.
- Journalists shall not intrude into anybody's private life, grief or distress unless justified by overriding consideration of the public interest.

ARTICLE 9: DEFAMATION

- Journalists shall regard defamation, blackmail, libel and false and groundless accusations as grave professional offences.
- Journalists shall guard against defamation, libel, slander and obscenity.

ARTICLE 10: DEALING WITH SOURCES

- Journalists shall normally identify sources of information. They may use unnamed sources when there is a clear and pressing reason to protect anonymity, the material gained from the confidential source is of strong public interest, and there is no other

reasonable way to obtain the information. If that is done, journalists shall explain the need for anonymity.

- When unnamed sources are used, media houses shall identify them as accurately as possible by affiliation or status.

ARTICLE 11: CONFIDENTIALITY/ NON-DISCLOSURE

- It is against the ethics of the profession to divulge information received in confidence no matter the consequences for refusing to do so.
- Journalists shall observe the principle of confidentiality, which is not to disclose the source of information obtained in confidence. They are bound to protect confidential sources of information.
Journalists shall not breach an agreement with a source of information obtained as “off-the-record” or as “background information.”

ARTICLE 12: SUBTERFUGE

Journalists shall avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information unless traditional and open methods are not available or accessible, and the information is in the public interest.

ARTICLE 13: CONFLICT OF INTEREST, REWARD, GRATIFICATION AND PROFESSIONAL INTEGRITY

- It shall be a professional misconduct if during the course of his/her duty, a journalist corruptly demands and receives monetary or material reward for publishing, broadcasting or suppressing his/her news or views.
- As fair and impartial observers, journalists must be free to comment on the activities of any publicly elected body or special interest group. But they cannot do so without an apparent conflict of interest if they are active members of an organization (including political parties) they are covering, and that includes membership through social media.
- Journalists may lose their credibility as fair observers if they write opinion pieces about subjects they are also investigating and covering as reporters.
- Journalists shall avoid conflicts of interest, whether they are real or perceived.
- Journalists shall refuse gifts, favours, fees, free travel³ and special treatment, and avoid political and other outside activities that may compromise integrity or impartiality, or may damage credibility and reputation.
- Journalists shall deny favoured treatment to advertisers, donors or any other special interests, and resist internal and external pressures to influence coverage.
- Journalists should distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two:
- Journalists shall prominently label sponsored content.

³ Where journalists travel with the support of an individual, organization or institution, they must indicate that in the publication or broadcast.

- Journalists shall neither solicit nor accept bribes, gratifications or patronage to suppress or publish information, or influence the performance of their professional duties in any way.

ARTICLE 15: DISCRIMINATION

- Journalists shall refrain from making pejorative reference to a person's ethnic group, race, religion, sex, or to any physical or mental illness or disability.
- Journalists shall not publish or broadcast material, which encourages discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, race, colour, creed, gender or sexual orientation.
- Journalists shall not produce material likely to lead to hatred or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age, gender, race, colour, creed, legal status, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation.

ARTICLE 16: VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT, CHILDREN AND MINORS

- Journalists shall avoid identifying victims of sexual assault.
- Journalists shall not identify, either by name or picture, or interview children under the age of 18 who are involved in cases concerning sexual offences, crimes and rituals or alleged witchcraft either as victims, witnesses or defendants.
- In reporting or obtaining news or pictures, reporters or press photographers shall do nothing that will cause pain or humiliation to innocent (especially children, the aged) bereaved or otherwise distressed persons. Subterfuge must not be used in obtaining such information.
- Journalists shall protect the rights of minors in criminal and other cases; and secure the consent of parents or guardians or teachers, before interviewing or photographing them.

ARTICLE 17: PERSONAL GRIEF OR DISTRESS

- In cases of personal grief or distress, journalists should exercise tact, deference and diplomacy in seeking information and publishing. Exercising respect for the victims is paramount at all times.

ARTICLE 18: DECENCY/ GOOD BEHAVIOUR

- The journalism profession demands good appearance at all occasions. Therefore journalists shall always be properly and decently dressed, comport themselves in a manner that conforms with public taste and professional standards.
- It shall be professional misconduct for journalists to behave or do anything that would bring discredit to SLAJ, the media or their profession.
- It is unethical for journalists to deprive indirectly or directly a professional colleague of his means of livelihood by unscrupulous method(s) or to seek promotion at the expense of another journalist.
- It shall be improper for journalists to ridicule or treat a fellow journalist with contempt, be he/she a superior or subordinate professional colleague.

- No bona fide journalist shall fraternize with fakes. Anyone who knows anyone to be fake and does not expose him/her, compromises his/her duty as a decent journalist and a good citizen and is guilty of professional misconduct.
- Journalists shall avoid the excessive consumption of alcohol in public; especially if it has the tendency to influence their behavior.
- Journalists should refrain from using offensive, abusive or vulgar language.

ARTICLE 19: DIGITAL MEDIA: SPECIAL ISSUES

- Ethical practice does not change with the medium. Journalists are bound by the above principles no matter where their stories are published or broadcast.
- Journalists shall consider all online content carefully, including blogging, and content posted on social media.
- Journalists shall not re-post rumours on social media or online publications.
- Online content shall be reported as carefully as print content, and when possible, subjected to full editing.
- Journalists shall try to obtain permission whenever possible to use online photos and videos, and always credit the source of the material, by naming the author and where the photo or video was previously posted.
- Journalists shall keep in mind that any information gathered through online means must be confirmed, verified and properly sourced.
- Journalists are vicariously liable for legal action, even if the material published or broadcast was taken from an online portal. Therefore, infinite caution is advised at all times.
- Personal online activity, including emails and social networking, shall generally be regarded as public and not private. Such activity can impact the journalist's professional credibility. As such, journalists shall think carefully before they post, and take special caution in declaring their political leanings online.

ARTICLE 20: ENFORCEMENT OF THE CODE

- The Complaints and Disciplinary Committee shall be responsible for interpreting the Code and recommending appropriate punishment for defaulting members to the Executive.

MEMBERSHIP COMMITMENT OR DECLARATION FORM

To be signed upon membership acceptance (or renewal of membership) and included in member's file.

I, _____ (the undersigned) hereby acknowledge and declare that I, as a member of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), will uphold the values, ethics and professionalism of the member organization.

I, _____ have read and understood the SLAJ Code of Ethics and will, at all times, abide by its tenets and intentions.

I, _____ have read and understood the Independent Media Commission's Journalist Code of Practice and will, at all times, abide by and act upon all tenets and intentions.

I, _____ agree to uphold all professional ethics and values of the journalism profession and will strive, at all times, to conduct myself as a professional, ethical member of SLAJ.

Signed

Dated

Witnessed