

# DIGITAL JOURNALISM

SUPPLEMENTAL GUIDANCE TO  
GLOBAL CHARTER OF ETHICS  
FOR JOURNALISTS





Credit: Philip Fong / AFP

# STARTING POINT:

**A COMMITMENT TO TELLING THE TRUTH  
TO THE VERY BEST OF YOUR ABILITIES.  
WHATEVER THE SITUATION.  
WHATEVER THE PLATFORM.**

In the digital environment, anyone can be a publisher. What enables you to gain and retain trust as a journalist is your consistent demonstration of ethical practice.

These guidelines are of particular relevance to journalists working in a digital environment, including but not limited to social and mobile media.

The first page offers general guidelines. Guidelines on the second page address several specific issues or concerns.

# VERIFICATION

## GUIDELINES

Any fact you publish should be supported by at least two credible sources.

More sources are even better.

Check your facts and your sources, then check them again.

## BECAUSE

- Misinformation and disinformation are rampant. Be part of the solution, not the problem.
- Getting it right is crucial to credibility. Nothing kills credibility faster than getting it wrong.

## HOW?

- Avoid getting drawn into a speed trap. Verification is worth the time it takes to do.

*See also: Points 1, 3 and 5 of the IFJ Global Charter*



# ACCOUNTABILITY

## GUIDELINES

Look for opportunities to show people why you are doing what you are doing. Could you come up with a rationale that readers would accept? If not, pause for a rethink.

## BECAUSE

- Transparency is both viable and valued in a digital world.
- Declining trust stems in large part from a tendency to misconstrue journalists' motives.

## HOW?

- Really do write out that rationale, at least mentally. If you're struggling, ask yourself why.



# RESPONSIVENESS

## GUIDELINES

Listen to users. Think in terms of exchanging information, not just delivering it.

Cultivate your natural curiosity. Journalism is about learning, not about collecting quotes.

## BECAUSE

- In a digital environment, no one has to stick around for a lecture. And they won't.
- As advertising declines as a revenue source, audiences rise. It pays to keep them onside.

## HOW?

Follow the 'golden rule' of audience engagement: value users as you want to be valued.



# SENSITIVITY

## GUIDELINES

Pause and think before you click to publish something instantly and globally.

Any harm to an individual should be clearly outweighed by a benefit to the public.

## BECAUSE

- Privacy, a human right, has never been easier to destroy or harder to restore.
- In a digital world, everyone can see everything - and amplify it by sharing.

## HOW?

- Identify the stakeholders in your story and consider the consequences of publication to each.



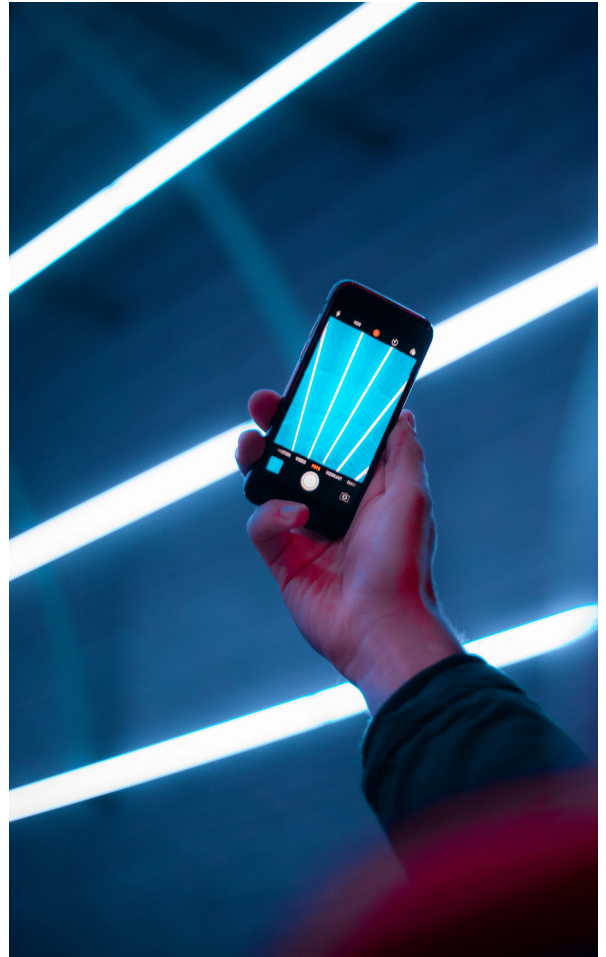
# CYBER SECURITY

## CONCERN

Any information created, stored or disseminated digitally is potentially obtainable by others.

## GUIDELINES

Assume that no communication is wholly, permanently private.  
...but minimise risk to vulnerable sources by keeping as much as possible offline and taking measures to improve your security online by using strong encryption methods.  
*See also: Points 7 and 8 of the IFJ Global Charter.*



# HATE SPEECH

## CONCERN

Your words and images can easily be weaponised, and your credibility co-opted.

## GUIDELINES

Avoid characterising sources or subjects by demographic attributes.  
Generalisations can contribute to stereotyping. Stick to reporting an individuals' words or actions  
*See also: Point 9 of the IFJ Global Charter.*



Credit: Vivek Prakash / AFP



# PERSONAL SAFETY

## CONCERN

It has never been simpler for those wanting to silence journalists to find them.  
... and through them, their sources or other informants, including vulnerable ones.

## GUIDELINES

Thorough assessment of risk, for both reporter and source, should be routine. Ensure someone knows where you are, what you are doing and when you expect to return.

# 'CITIZEN JOURNALISM'

## CONCERN

User-supplied words and images can be invaluable - but also unreliable.

## GUIDELINES

Develop, and rigorously follow, a clear procedure to verify all external content.  
...but nurture the providers who are credible, taking care not to put them in danger.



# CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

## CONCERN

Trust in journalists is low and falling worldwide. Perceived bias is a major factor.

Fairness and impartiality have little value if audience doubt your commitment to them.

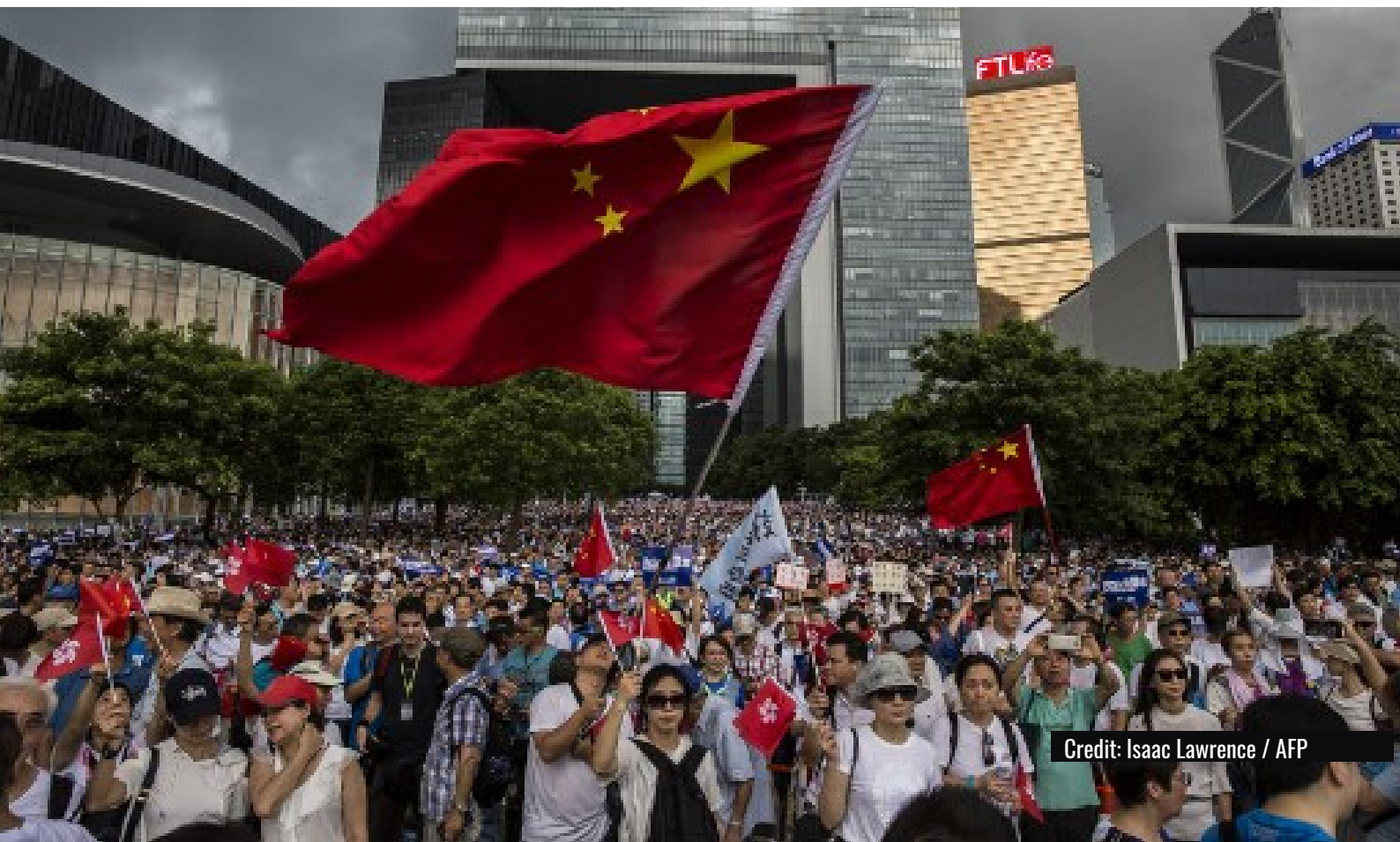
## GUIDELINES

Look for opportunities to provide evidence that you work in the public interest.

Avoid compromising credibility with personal views on social media about topics you cover.

Resist all efforts to compromise journalistic independence and integrity.

*See also: Points 11, 13 and 14 of the IFJ Global Charter.*



# CASE STUDIES FROM HONG KONG

Connected to information presented in this guidance resource, these are examples of ethical issues that journalists face when reporting. One concerns, the identity protection of activists; and, the second, involves journalists racing to provide full and, what they consider fair, coverage of a story. In some of these instances activists also endanger their own lives by revealing their identity and location.

## CHALLENGE 1:

### THE ISSUE OF PRIVACY - TO BLUR FACES OR NOT

During the protests, and amid an increase in state surveillance, concerns were raised about showing the faces or exposing the identity of protesters. It was argued that revealing the faces of protesters and other sources exposed these people to further risk – including doxing and threats of violence. Some media blurred the faces of protesters while others did not. There are also sources who refused to be interviewed without hiding their identity, taking the onus of their own security into their own hands.

The dilemma for journalists is to decide whether to only blur the faces of sources who explicitly ask for their identities to be hidden or should this practice be applied more widely to ensure the protection of individuals?

The issue of privacy was demonstrated when the LegCo building was stormed by protesters on the night of July 1, 2019. One unmasked protester made a public speech in front of the camera. [HKFP posted a photo of him on Facebook](#), which drew →

criticism and there were calls to delete the photo. Chief Editor Tom Grundy explained on Twitter that the decision had been taken to use the photo because the protester 'deliberately took off his mask as media photographed and filmed him.' ■



## CHALLENGE 2:

### REAL TIME REPORTING AND LIVE BROADCASTING

Frequently the immediate publication of a news item endangers the safety of individuals and sources. Controversy has arisen around the timely release of news and which occasions are appropriate for live streaming, what information should be published live and what information should be carefully edited, delaying the release of a news story. Various scenarios have emerged, raising ethical questions about putting sources in harm's way.

One case is the well-publicised Polytechnic University Protest.

When Polytechnic University was besieged by police in November 2019, protesters trapped inside tried to find ways to escape. Escape plans, routes and scenarios were instantly reported by Oriental Daily and Apple Daily, resulting in an immediate police response. Critics said the media helped police 'close the escape doors' on the protesters. A similar situation arose on September 3 when journalists from Apple Daily and HK01 boarded a bus with protesters while live streaming, and pro-Beijing media even acknowledged the role of



the media for enabling the police to successfully make arrests. Netizens blamed the networks for providing real time information, which led to police boarding the bus and arresting protesters. There have are also cases including the airport evacuation on September 1, when the escape routes were also live-streamed/reported but not arrests were made and no controversies arouse, while there are some other scenarios that protesters have been accused by netizens of not being cautious enough by revealing their own location have endangered their own safety and wellbeing. ■

### CHALLENGE 3:

### GATHERING A NUMBER OF SOURCES

Getting the facts right means verification - support from at least two sources. Recent coverage from the Covid-19 pandemic in Hong Kong shows an over-reliance on one source to shape the stories. During the SARS outbreak in 2003, reporters relied on a number of sources for reports and they were able to visit hospitals. In the current Covid-19 crises, reporters in Hong Kong often gather information by attending press conferences held daily by the Centre for Health Protection (CHP), under the Government Health Department. The main figures used are the ones released by the CHP. This has

meant that the media focus on health policy rather than other issues such as the experiences of individual patients or medical teams.

In the current crises, reporters seldom visit hospitals for safety reasons. There are, however, reporters who interview and obtain opinions from medical professionals who can provide different perspectives. Journalsits are faced with a challenge: to protect not only their own safety but the safety of their community at large by practicing social distancing, or access sources to verify the facts. ■



# A FEW GOOD INFORMATION SOURCES:

## SUPPLEMENTAL GUIDANCE FROM IFJ

- Accountable Journalism: Ethics codes (global compilation) <https://accountablejournalism.org/ethics-codes>
- Ethical Journalism Network <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/> and <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/resources>
- First Draft News <https://firstdraftnews.org/> and <https://firstdraftnews.org/training/>
- Global Investigative Journalism Network <https://gijn.org/> and <https://gijn.org/fact-checking-verification/>
- The Poynter Institute: Ethics and Trust <https://www.poynter.org/media-news/ethics-trust/>