

Journalism's ethics code gets an AI-era rewrite as trust in media craters

By Jocelyn Noveck, *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 2, 2026

Walk into a corner of a newsroom somewhere and you can often find it affixed to a bulletin board: the Society of Professional Journalists's Code of Ethics. It's less than a thousand words, fitting neatly on a poster.

Yet as the media landscape seems to shift daily and new technologies emerge, SPJ has decided that the time is at hand—for the first time in 12 years, and only the sixth in the code's century-long history.

But why update in the first place? The first reason—hardly a surprise—is the rapid emergence of AI.

Another issue concerns the very term “professional journalists.” Recent years have seen a huge increase in independent, so-called “creator journalists.” The SPJ thinks they, too, should have a code to guide them. (The code, as always, is a voluntary guide and not enforceable.)

One key goal is to address an existential crisis in the field: an increasing lack of public trust in the media.

The SPJ, which has some 4,000 members nationwide, was founded in 1909. In 1926, it adopted its first code of ethics, then formed an ethics committee in 1948 and revised the code five times—the last in 2014.

The four, unchanging key principles: “Seek Truth and Report It.” “Minimize Harm.” “Act Independently.” “Be Accountable and Transparent.”

But much else has evolved. A report accompanying the draft notes that traditional newsroom jobs are dwindling as the industry contracts. Simultaneously, it says, there's been a marked growth in citizen journalists, freelancers, online influencers and pundits.

It also cites the shrinking presence of news outlets serving as watchdogs, as well as “people, organizations and private investors without journalism backgrounds, who are buying or opening news properties, affecting news coverage, influencing editorial decisions and pushing personal agendas.”

The SPJ says the rapid rise in use of generative AI and other new technology—in news, as elsewhere—raises ethical questions.

So a new line says: “Remember that speed, technology or medium do not excuse inaccuracy or unfairness. Journalists are ethically responsible for their work, regardless of tools and technologies used.” In other words: The buck stops with the journalist, regardless of what AI might say.

The proposed draft also addresses other issues like verification, misinformation, crime reporting, fabricated images and more.

A notable addition—and one that generated much discussion—is this line: “Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable. Counter the unfair marginalization of those with less power.”

Given the changes in the industry, one might ask another, overarching question: Does one code fit all? And will it even be acknowledged?

SPJ President Chris Vaccaro is confident that the code, which has been translated into multiple languages, will be followed by many. That newsroom bulletin board, he says, is now the entire world.

Committee member Eric Deggans, NPR's critic-at-large and a media ethics professor at Washington and Lee University, says, “I wish some people who owned journalism outlets would read the code, because too often they're pressuring their employees to do things that are unethical, and the employee has to figure out a way to preserve their journalism ethics and also give the employer what they want.”