



## SPJ Georgia Media Literacy Survival Kit

*What does a journalist do? Which news outlets can I trust? Do you pay for information?*

Journalists often face questions from the public about the inner workings of the media. It's important to have the answers ready – especially when disinformation, misinformation, and distrust in the press have become widespread.

To help journalists prepare for these conversations, we are providing some basic media literacy talking points compiled from major journalism resources.

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### ***Who is a journalist?***

There is no rigid definition of what a journalist is. The First Amendment allows anyone to publicly share ideas, and journalism is not regulated by the government. Generally, journalists research, write, edit, and report true accounts of events. Credible journalists abide by a set of ethical standards, and reputable publications share those guidelines publicly.

### ***Do journalists have an agenda?***

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) has identified four principles that ethical journalism should stand by. **Seek truth and report it:** be accurate, fair, and thorough. **Minimize harm:** treat sources, colleagues, and members of the public with respect. **Act independently:** avoid conflicts of interest, favoritism, and bribery. **Be accountable and transparent.**

### ***Social media – friend or foe?***

For journalists, social media is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, anyone can publish anything they want on social media – whether it’s factual or not. This exacerbates the spread of misinformation and disinformation, making it harder for audiences to distinguish between facts, opinion, and propaganda. At the same time, social media platforms are valuable marketing and engagement tools for professional news outlets to promote their work and interact with their audience.

### ***How can I distinguish between news and opinion?***

Legitimate print and online news organizations typically separate news and opinion. Opinion content should be labeled as such by using terms like commentary, editorial, or op-eds. A quality opinion piece should present a specific perspective on a topic or issue while adding verifiable facts and evidence to make a coherent argument. On TV, the lines can get blurry. On-air experts introduced as commentators, analysts, or contributors tend to present opinion rather than news.

### ***How can I spot the difference between “real news” and “fake news?”***

Here are ways to determine whether a news report is legitimate:

- Pay attention to the domain and web address. Established websites have trusted domains like “.com” and “.org.” Fishy websites often have weird addresses, like “.co.com.”
- Does the report clarify where the information comes from? In journalism, this is called “attribution,” and fake news articles often don’t have attribution. Also, make sure the article has quotes from reputable sources that can be easily verified with an online search.
- Check the “About Us” section to learn more about the news organization.
- Use fact-checking sites and reverse image search, like [factcheck.org](https://factcheck.org) or [tineye.com](https://tineye.com).

### ***Do publishers or owners of news organizations tell journalists what and how to report?***

In a perfect world, the business side and the editorial side of a news organization operate separately to guarantee independent reporting. It’s a rule that many, but not all, legacy outlets still abide by. In the case of small, especially hyperlocal news organizations, the owner, publisher, and editor are often one person. The integrity of the news organization depends on their judgment. It’s an ongoing discussion in the media industry.

### ***What constitutes a conflict of interest?***

For a journalist, a conflict of interest can be political, like an affiliation to a cause, a party, or a candidate. Or it can be financial, like monetary interest in a company or enterprise that the journalist covers. SPJ advises journalists “to avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived,” and avoid political or any other activity that may compromise integrity and impartiality or may damage credibility. For example, a reporter should not cover the political campaign of a friend or family member. Conflict of interest that can’t be avoided, should be disclosed.

### ***Can journalists be friends with their sources?***

The general advice for a reporter is to be friendly and fair with their sources but avoid being close friends. But journalists are humans. Reporters and their sources often spend a lot of time together,

they get to know each other and sometimes develop a high level of trust. Many sources provide valuable tips and story ideas, which reporters need and rely on. So, the bottom line is that both sides need to be transparent about their professional roles and do their best to avoid conflicts of interest.

### ***Do journalists have the responsibility to protect their sources?***

Ideally, all information in a media report is attributed to a named source who speaks on the record. There are exceptions if a source has important information but is in danger of losing their job, freedom or life, or faces other harm, like retribution or stigma. Generally, journalists should consider their sources' motives before promising anonymity – and if they agree to do so, they should explain in their story why anonymity was granted.

### ***Do news organizations pay their sources?***

No. Credible news organizations do not pay their sources in exchange for information. So-called checkbook journalism is widely considered unethical, and many news outlets have a policy forbidding it. Vice versa, sources do not pay to be featured in the media – unless it is sponsored content, which is a form of advertising and should be clearly marked.

### ***Do news organizations let sources review stories before publication?***

Newsroom policies vary. Generally, sources are made aware before the interview that they are speaking on the record, and editing is not a community affair. Sometimes, prior to publication, reporters read quotes back to the source for accuracy and fairness and as a safeguard for the journalist, especially when quotes have been edited for clarity. But sending back entire stories for review is not common and is prohibited by most legitimate newsrooms.

### ***Will artificial intelligence (AI) soon replace journalists?***

It's unclear. AI is radically transforming the media landscape, and there is ongoing discussion about the possible impact. Some say it may be the end of journalism as we know it, but there will still be a place for authentic journalism to complement generative AI. AI will most likely take center stage in mass content production, but it may also elevate the value of human-created journalistic content. Personally reported and crafted narratives may become more exclusive and sought after.

Sources: [SPJ Code of Ethics](#), [The Poynter Institute](#), [Nieman Lab](#), [The Atlanta Press Club's media literacy guidebook](#), [Georgia Humanities](#)

Also, check out the [video of SPJ Georgia's Media Literacy Panel](#), hosted by WSB-TV studios in Atlanta on February 22, 2025.