

*Learn to tell what's real.*

# GEORGIA KNOWS MEDIA

An Initiative by  SPJ Georgia

## “Georgia Knows Media” Media Education Survival Kit

**Do journalists make up stories? Which news outlets can I trust? Do reporters pay for information?**

As misinformation and distrust in the press grow, journalists face questions from the public about their work. Some questions are hostile; others are simply uninformed. But most are rooted in a lack of understanding of how journalism works: **what journalists do, how they do it and why.**

**Journalists need to get ready for these conversations.** Here are some basic media-education talking points, along with tips for distinguishing fact from fake and AI-generated content. They are based on SPJ Georgia’s **Georgia Knows Media** campaign.

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### ***What is media?***

- Media is **any channel used to create and share information**, stories or messages with an audience.
- **News media is a branch of media** dedicated to gathering, verifying and reporting fact-based information in the public interest.
- Social media are digital platforms where people and organizations create and exchange content. Unlike professional journalism, that content does not necessarily go through verification, fact-checking or editorial review. For journalists, **social media can serve as a source** (for example, a public statement by an elected official) **and as a tool** to promote their work and engage with audiences.
- In a nutshell: **All journalism is media — but not all media is journalism.**

### ***What is a journalist?***

There is no rigid definition of what a journalist is. Journalism is not a licensed profession. **The First Amendment allows anyone to publicly share ideas, and journalism is not regulated by the government.** Generally, journalists research, vet and report true accounts of events with the goal of informing the public. Credible journalists abide by **a set of ethical standards**, and reputable publications share those guidelines publicly.

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### ***What is a news influencer?***

A news influencer shares content about current events **through the lens of their own personality** and opinion. Their work is primarily **focused on audience engagement**, relatability and personal branding in addition to, and sometimes instead of traditional journalistic reporting. (*Adapted from a definition by the Knight Center for Journalism*)

### ***Who decides what is a story?***

Usually, it's a **collaborative process** involving reporters and editors. Journalists look for information that affects a lot of people, is new or significant, or helps the public understand what is happening. Choosing a story involves **a series of professional judgments, not randomness or conspiracy**.

### ***Do publishers tell journalists what and how to report?***

Ideally, the **business and editorial sides of a news organization operate separately** to protect independent reporting. Most legacy outlets still abide by that rule. At smaller, especially hyperlocal outlets, the owner, publisher and editor may be the same person. In those cases, the organization's independence depends heavily on that person's judgment and ethical standards. The relationship between business interests and editorial independence remains an ongoing discussion in the media industry.

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

Credible news organizations distinguish between news reporting and opinion. **Opinion content should be clearly labeled** with terms such as commentary, editorial, analysis or op-ed. On television, the distinction can sometimes be less obvious. On-air guests introduced as commentators, analysts or contributors may offer interpretation or opinion rather than straight news reporting.

### ***How can I spot the difference between real news, fake news and AI created content?***

Do your own checks. Here are a few ways to determine whether a report is credible:

- Look closely at the **website and web address**. Does it belong to a recognizable news organization, or is it designed to imitate one? Established websites have trusted domains like ".com" and ".org." Fishy websites often have weird addresses, like ".co.com."
- Does the report explain where its information comes from? In journalism, this is called **attribution**. Be skeptical of articles that make major claims without identifying or describing their sources.
- Look for quotes and information from **reputable sources that can be easily verified** with an online search.
- Check the outlet's **About Us** section. Who owns it? Who produces its journalism?
- Check if the outlet publishes **corrections**.
- Use **fact-checking sites and reverse-image search tools**, such as [factcheck.org](https://factcheck.org) or [tineye.com](https://tineye.com), to verify questionable claims or images.
- When you suspect AI-generated content, **look for additional reporting** from independent, credible sources before sharing it.

### ***Why are journalists disrespectful and not using courtesy titles?***

It's not disrespect; **it's protocol**. Most newsrooms follow a standardized writing guide called **AP Style**. Under AP Style, courtesy titles such as Mr., Mrs. and Ms. generally aren't used unless they appear in a direct quote. Formal titles are capitalized only when they come directly before a person's name. Professional titles are only used before a full name on first reference and are often abbreviated, such as Dr. or Gov.

### ***Why should I trust a journalist?***

Don't! Vet the journalist first, just as journalists are expected to vet their sources and verify information.

- Look up the **journalist's bio and previous work**.
- Check out their **LinkedIn** profile.
- Look at the news organization they work for and its editorial standards.
- Remember that **reporters generally do not operate alone**. Their work may be reviewed by editors, fact-checkers, producers and others.
- Trust in journalism is built through editorial process, not simply granted by authority

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

- Journalists strive to be fair, accurate and minimize harm. Fairness means **presenting verified facts** and different, relevant perspectives.
- **Journalists are human**, and individual bias exists. That's why verification, editorial review and oversight matter.
- Fairness does not mean treating every claim as equally valid. **Evidence matters**. Claims supported by facts receive more weight or space than unsupported ones.

### ***Do journalists pay their sources?***

No. Credible news organizations do not pay 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 paid or sponsored content, which is a form of advertising and should be clearly identified as such.

### ***Do journalists let sources review stories before publication?***

Generally, no. **Editing is not a community affair**, although newsroom policies vary. Reporters may check facts, technical details or quotes with a source before publication, especially when the subject matter is complex and quotes have been edited for clarity. But sending back entire stories for review is uncommon and prohibited by most legitimate newsrooms, because it **compromises editorial independence**.

### ***If a source remains anonymous, does that mean the reporter made it up?***

No. Ideally, all information in a media report is attributed to named sources who speak 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. **Anonymous sources still must be vetted**, and their identity is known to the reporter and often to an editor. When journalists grant anonymity, they should **explain to readers or viewers why it was necessary**.

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

It happens. Reporters and their sources **often develop a high level of trust**, especially when they work together frequently. Many sources also provide valuable tips and story ideas, which reporters rely on. But **both sides must be transparent** about their respective professional roles, draw the line if needed and avoid conflicts of interest.

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

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

### ***Who pays journalists?***

- **Sources do not pay journalists.**
- There are different funding models meant to uphold independence:
  - Corporate revenue
  - Subscriptions
  - Advertisements
  - Nonprofits & foundations
  - Cooperative ownership (journalists, readers, community stakeholders)
  - Events & sponsorships
- Most journalists are not in it for the money.

### ***Will AI soon replace journalists?***

Hopefully not! There’s no question that AI is reshaping the media landscape. AI is likely to play an increasing role in producing, organizing and distributing information. At the same time, **it may make original human reporting even more valuable**. Journalism depends on skills AI cannot easily replicate: Building trust with sources, witnessing events firsthand, asking unexpected questions, investigating wrongdoing, exercising judgment and providing context. As AI-generated content becomes more common, personally reported, verified and thoughtfully crafted journalism may be more important than ever.