

Ethical Guidelines for Editorial Staff of Wisconsin Public Media

This document identifies Ethical Guidelines for Wisconsin Public Radio (WPR) and Wisconsin Public Television (WPT), collectively and with their division administrative unit referenced as Wisconsin Public Media (WPM), as they apply to journalists, those who create content with public policy implications and senior managers who report to the directors of WPR, WPT, the Educational Communications Board (ECB) and WPM. Individuals who are uncertain as to whether this document pertains to them must consult with their supervisor. Supervisors are obligated to review these guidelines with relevant staff upon hiring and periodically, at least annually.

Because no guideline can anticipate every circumstance, staff should become familiar with this document and the [Public Media Code of Integrity](#) as context for day-to-day decision-making. The code has been embraced by WPM as a statement that reflects institutional values and as broad context for these guidelines. These guidelines are intended to help staff recognize potential conflicts and outline ways to address them with supervisors.

Public Broadcasting and the Public Trust

The reputation of public media rests on public trust. In many ways, trustworthiness and the ethical practices that engender that trust are public media's most valuable assets.

The public must be confident that WPR/WPT content isn't influenced by outside interests, commercial pressures, political influences or the personal interests of its staff. Ethical behavior that assures and affirms the integrity of our work supersedes the personal interests of individual staff members, whose actions must be beyond reproach and who must continually strive to maintain these standards in order to serve our audience and uphold the core of our mission – to inform – and to avoid undermining or jeopardizing the public's perception of public media.

Protecting Credibility

What we say and do – both on the job and in public – matter. Here are some basic questions we should ask ourselves regularly:

- Are my actions in line with the various policies that guide the staff of WPM and the public media industry?
- Will my professional credibility, the credibility of my colleagues, the standing of WPR, WPT or WPM, be harmed by my actions, should they become public?

Ethics Standards for Wisconsin Public Media

All employees of WPM are bound by the [Code of Ethics](#) of the UW System and the WPM Ethical Guidelines. Staff at the ECB are bound by the [Code of Ethics](#) for State of Wisconsin employees. Under these codes, every member of the staff at the time of appointment makes a personal commitment to professional honesty and integrity. It is the employee's responsibility to review and follow these codes. Should violations occur, management will investigate and recommend appropriate action.

WPM recognizes the rights of staff members for freedom of expression and association. As private individuals and within parameters of these guidelines, staff are free to be creatively and civically engaged in their communities and to earn income in ways separate from their employment at UW-Madison. We are also free to discuss and explore any issue privately in our homes, with our family and friends. This is referred to as the "living room" rule.

We also acknowledge that what we do outside of our professional roles can affect the public's trust in our journalism. Complications arise when personal opinions, actions or interests, conflict with professional responsibilities or when there are gray areas where it's difficult to know the right thing to do in a specific situation. No single document can cover every possibility or anticipate all situations; however, these guidelines are one way of clarifying our commitment to ethical practices and creating a stimulus for continued conversation.

- Journalists, those who create content with public policy implications, and senior managers, who report to the directors of WPR/WPT, ECB and WPM and so guide and represent the organization, (Editorial and Executive Staff) may not make political donations or participate in political activities or public expressions of political or policy opinions. This also includes engaging in politically charged discussions with people such as donors, programming partners or sources, whether at work or on their own time.
- Editorial and Executive Staff must also refrain from political or public policy advocacy including signing petitions, writing letters to the editor, posting and sharing on social media, attending protests (unless assigned to cover by manager), speaking at public meetings, posting yard signs, putting bumper stickers on their vehicles, etc. Doing so could suggest that a staff member has a clear bias on an issue, or that WPM has a point of view on a policy issue. The exception to this guideline is for those Executive Staff who are expected to take positions on policy or funding issues that directly impact public broadcasting.
- Editorial and Executive Staff may not run for or hold public office and simultaneously or subsequently continue in their editorial or executive position.
- Partners or spouses of those covered under these guidelines aren't subject to employment restrictions but should they desire to donate to a political advocacy group or political campaign they should do so in their own name.

Nothing in these ethical guidelines should deter staff from contributing to non-political charitable and nonprofit organizations, except to note that many organizations list their donors in newsletters, online and in their annual reports. So, your contribution to that organization will be public record. In most cases this is inconsequential.

It is essential that staff understand the nature and activities of nonprofit organizations with respect to public policy issues. In some situations, participating might call into question one's impartiality when working on a project. These situations are best reviewed with your supervisor.

- Journalists, those who create content with public policy implications, and senior managers, may not serve on boards of partisan organizations or those that lobby for partisan public issues.

Disclosure of past or current civic engagement is key to ethical behavior. Editorial and Executive Staff have the responsibility to fully disclose to their supervisors current or past donations, memberships or activities related to public policy that could challenge their perceived impartiality or endanger the public's trust in WPR or WPT. Supervisors will determine if such activities will result in a reassignment and/or may request a written explanation of the individual's involvement.

Organizational disclosure of real or perceived conflict of interest to the public can mitigate or eliminate the appearance of conflict. For example, when the UW System president appears on *Here and Now* or *Central Time*, we acknowledge on the air that WPR and WPT are, in part, licensed to the University of Wisconsin, so that the audience may best judge the integrity of the interview. Determination about the nature, application and repetition of on-air/online disclosure is subject to sound professional judgment.

Social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, have become an integral part of everyday life. The line between private and public activity has been blurred by these tools. Information on your Facebook page, your blog; and your tweets – even if you intend them to be personal messages to your friends or family – can be circulated beyond the intended audience. This content, therefore, can represent you and WPR/WPT to the outside world as much as a news story or talk show does. First and foremost – we should do nothing that could undermine our credibility with the public, damage WPR/WPT's standing as an impartial source of news and information, or otherwise jeopardize our reputation.

- Journalists and senior executives may not advocate for political, public policy or polarizing issues online. This extends to using social media in any form to express personal views on a political or other controversial issue that you couldn't include for WPR/WPT broadcast or online publication. Private communications using personal social media accounts, personal email services or apps to friends and family are the electronic extension of "the living room" and therefore allowed.

Social networking websites may offer opportunities for research related to public policy issues or public representatives. Your simple participation – "friending" or "liking" – in some pages or online groups, could be seen to indicate that you endorse their views. However, joining online groups may help us gather journalistic information, so we must use caution in making sure to have a balance of "friends" enlisted in research efforts (ex: Recall Governor Smith Facebook group and I support Governor Smith Facebook group). Care must be taken that participation in such sites doesn't inadvertently create a perception of affiliation with or endorsement of candidates or those holding office, political parties, etc.

FURTHER INFORMATION

If you have questions, concerns, suggestions please contact your supervisor, WPM senior leaders or WPM's Human Resources Director who can facilitate a discussion.

WPM, UW System and State of Wisconsin Guidelines and Policies

[WPM Ethical Guidelines](#)

UW System Code of Ethics for [University Staff](#) and [Academic Staff](#)

[State of Wisconsin Code of Ethics](#)

Media Guidelines

[National Public Radio Ethics Handbook](#)

[PBS Editorial and Funding Standards](#)

Revised May 2019