

Media Standards Audit: Reporting for Good Governance and Transparency in Journalism

Introduction

Across the world there are robust and vibrant media communities. Journalism works at a cracking pace across all platforms and media compete fiercely for market and audience share.

But many people, including many inside media, worry that in this overheated atmosphere standards of journalism are put under strain by intolerable time constraints and increasing friction between journalism and commercial objectives.

Media companies themselves often find it difficult to monitor effectively their own performance and particularly their obligations to be open, inclusive and accountable.

The Ethical Journalism Network, a coalition of journalists, media and media support groups, is now looking at ways of helping media to keep track of their corporate responsibilities by helping them to achieve their objectives.

As media adjust to new market conditions and the converged, open information environment they seek to build public trust and investor confidence by improving their operations and activity.

The aim of this proposal is to help media establish a process to measure performance, set goals, and manage change through an organisational report that acts as an internal audit, providing information on the company and its work. The objective is to promote accountability through transparency.

The information is important for internal consumption, but it should also form the basis of the company's strategy for outreach – to help build trust with the audience and to promote the company's brand as an ethical and responsible provider of journalism and other information services.

The information to be provided for an ethical audit covers the following:

1. Management and ownership of the company
 - a) Status, name and address of the company, its objectives and its range of activities
 - b) Board of Directors
 - c) Structure of management
 - d) Financial holdings
 - e) Income received from state sources (advertising, grants, etc.)
 - f) Details of membership and participation in groups such as industry associations or national/international advocacy
2. Information on economic performance

- a) Details of the company's financial status and reports as provided to national authorities as required by law.
 - b) A commentary on financial trends and market conditions.
3. Company commitment to good governance and ethical standards
- a) Mission statement
 - b) codes of conduct
 - c) governance rules (avoiding conflicts of interest)
 - d) engagement with external regulators (press council, etc)
4. Industrial relations, labour standards and training activity
- a) Respect for national and international labour standards including trade union recognition, collective bargaining and gender equality
 - b) Provision of skills training for staff
 - c) Numbers of full time, part-time and freelance staff
 - d) Actions to promote diversity in staff employment
5. Safety and Protection of Journalists and Media Staff
- a) Provision of training and awareness-raising for hostile environment reporting
 - b) First aid training
 - c) Availability of medical insurance and life insurance
 - d) Co-operation with industry initiatives to improve safety
6. How Company deals with complaints and concerns of audience
- a) Internal systems for dealing with complaints
 - b) Numbers of complaints received
 - c) External systems for dealing with complaints (press council, etc.)
 - d) Actions for engaging with the audience and readers
7. How company protects editorial independence
- a) Separation of commercial activities and editorial activities
 - b) Independence of the editor in chief
 - c) Obligation of journalists to respect ethical codes
8. Company objectives and targets
- a) Set out targets – editorially and commercially – for the company
 - b) Assess successes and failures

This report can be provided in such a way – through an annual publication which should be as accessible as possible to all stakeholders including staff, shareholders, and the public.

This approach recognises that all stakeholders in media – investors, workforce and the audience – benefit from transparency and accountability.

Good reporting enables companies to systematically review their performance and win public confidence. Greater transparency will also increase economic opportunities and enable better informed decision-making.

The report should be clear. It should be understandable and accessible to stakeholders; it should contain information that supports analysis relative to other media; and it should be accurate and detailed enough for stakeholders to assess the company's performance.

The report provides an opportunity to disclose the values of the company and can establish a framework for the company to manage opportunities and to be accountable.

Checklist for Key Report Information

1. ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE :

The major elements in performance with as much transparency as possible on company revenues and expenditures as well as all income streams from state sources.

2. EMPLOYMENT :

Provide information on the total workforce by employment type, employment contract, and region, broken down by gender. Key elements of collective bargaining agreements covering staff labour rights.

3. HEALTH AND SAFETY:

Set out actions by company to protect journalists and media staff including

- Provision of training in hostile environment work and first aid.
- Provision of security protection.
- Provision of health and life insurance to vulnerable staff members.
- Other education, training, counseling, prevention, and risk-control actions to assist staff regarding serious diseases and physical attacks.
- Health and safety topics covered in formal agreements with trade unions.
- Engagement with safety activities at national and international level including International News Safety Institute and International Freedom of Expression Exchange

4. TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Set out company provision of training by

- Average hours of training per year provided for employee by gender, and by employee category.
- Programmes for skills management and lifelong learning that support the continued employability of employees and assist them in managing career endings.
- How employees receive regular performance and career development reviews, by gender.

5. DIVERSITY AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES:

Set out the company's performance in composition of governance bodies and breakdown of employees per employee category according to gender, age group, minority group membership, and other indicators of diversity.

6. EQUAL PAY FOR WOMEN AND MEN

Provide information on the ratio of basic salary and remuneration of women to men by employee category, by significant locations of operation.

7. HUMAN RIGHTS:

Report on recognition of and attachment to respect for national and international standards covering:

- Freedom of expression
- Portrayal related to Human Rights
- Cultural Rights
- Intellectual Property
- Protection of Privacy
- Corruption and lobbying
- Audience Interaction
- Advertisement
- Media Literacy

Set out agreements and contracts that include clauses incorporating human rights concerns, or that have undergone human rights screening as well as total hours of employee training on policies and procedures concerning aspects of human rights that are relevant to operations, including the percentage of employees trained. Report on total number of incidents of discrimination and corrective actions taken.

8. EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE

Report on structures and process for ensuring the right of editorial staff to work ethically and according to conscience including

- Obligations to respect an editorial code of conduct (is this set out in work contracts, for instance?)

- The appointment and independence of the editor in chief
- Systems for monitoring journalism and correcting errors
- Structures for setting out editorial policy and dealing with breaches of codes and guidelines.
- Policy regarding use of social networks (for instance, rules regarding Twitter and Facebook)

9. FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Report on company recognition of the right to exercise freedom of association and collective bargaining and actions taken to support these rights.

Report on number of grievances related to human rights filed, addressed and resolved through formal grievance mechanisms.

10. CORRUPTION:

Report on company actions to combat corruption as well as the number of employees trained in anti-corruption policies and procedures and actions taken in response to incidents of corruption.

11. PUBLIC POLICY:

Set out public policy positions and participation in public policy development and lobbying including the total value of financial and in-kind contributions to political parties, politicians, and related institutions.

12. CONTENT DISSEMINATION:

Report on actions taken to improve performance in relation to quality of content issues (particularly in editorial coverage related to vulnerable audiences) and results.

Report on the number and nature of feedback and complaints over editorial content and the responses of the company and outline the processes for addressing these concerns.

13. AUDIENCE INTERACTION and RATINGS

Report on methods to interact with audiences and results. Explain evaluation of ratings and practices related to customer satisfaction, including results of surveys measuring customer satisfaction.

14. MARKETING STANDARDS

Company policy related to adherence to laws, standards, and voluntary codes related to marketing communications, including advertising, promotion, and sponsorship.

Give details of all actions taken to separate marketing communications (advertising and commercial activities) from editorial work.

15. MEDIA LITERACY

Report on actions taken to empower audiences through media literacy skills development and results obtained.

16. PRIVACY and DEFAMATION

Report on total number of complaints regarding breaches of privacy or actions against the company regarding libel or defamation.

(This guide draws heavily from the detailed and comprehensive international standards of reporting for media drafted by the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), and GRI's Media Sector Supplement, which was launched in May 2012.¹)

¹ See www.globalreporting.org. GRI was founded in the US in 1997 by CERES and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). In 2002, GRI moved its central office to Amsterdam, where the Secretariat is currently located. GRI has regional 'Focal Points' in Australia, Brazil, China, India and the USA, and interacts with a worldwide network of 30,000 people.