

IRAN INTERNATIONAL - EDITORIAL GUIDELINES

Introduction

This document explains Iran International's editorial values and practices, and is an essential part of the editorial contract that everyone involved in Iran International has signed up to - investors, managers, staff, contributors, and external providers. The purpose of these guidelines is to help our staff produce high quality content, and to share with our stakeholders the standards that they can expect from Iran International.

Our journalism is independent, impartial and honest, aiming to achieve highest standards of accuracy and trust. These can be considered as universal values, and are adopted and practised by leading media organisations across the world. Iran international is fully committed to these world standards. These standards are all interconnected and apply to all of our content on all platforms. They are essential for achieving the ethical and editorial integrity which our audience can trust.

Iran International is a multi-platform service covering all the news and views of relevance to Farsi-speaking audiences in Iran and the diaspora, and covering the widest spectrum of social and political views without exceptions or exclusions. It is a privately-owned channel that is committed to objective, impartial and balanced coverage.

1. Editorial Responsibility and referrals

Editorial responsibility in Iran International rests with the editorial team, starting from the content producer (MJ) through SMJs, Senior Editors, to the Executive Editors and to the Head of Channel, who carries ultimate responsibility for the output.

Everyone who is involved in producing content and making editorial decisions for Iran International (whether staff or external providers) is required to understand our editorial principles and work within them.

Knowledge of these guidelines is not only an essential professional requirement, but also a contractual obligation, and the personal responsibility of all editorial staff.

Our journalists must also have a comprehensive understanding of the law, particularly on defamation, contempt, privacy, data protection and copyright.

Editorial decisions at Iran international are devolved as much as possible to our content producers at the levels closest to the output, and our staff are expected to have the skills and experience, and the editorial judgement to decide what content goes out.

Producing content is a collaborative process, and everyone involved in it often discuss their decisions with their colleagues and managers during their production work. You should never hesitate to consult your senior colleagues, if/when you are in doubt about anything. And more senior editors should be ready to discuss any questions with you and offer guidance.

This is just common-sense, and it's everyone's responsibility to judge when to ask. But there are some decisions, which are particularly difficult or contentious, or may have wider implication for the channel. These would be *mandatory referrals*. In other words, editorial staff must formally refer them up to more senior managers in good time, so that decisions can be considered carefully at a higher level. In practice, this often means talking to your shift leader (ie your line manager or the most senior editorial person on duty in your section at the time) in the first instance, who can in turn refer the decision further up to her/his editor, if need be. The more difficult and contentious the issue, the higher up it needs to go. (For clarity, if there is no Senior Editor on duty in your section at the time, you should refer up to your supervising SMJ or acting shift leader. These will be different in different areas of the service, whether they be Intake, Output, Planning, Online, etc)

Most of our key editorial standards are covered in these guidelines, but the following are the specific circumstances for mandatory referrals - when you must refer up, and who you should refer to. And to reiterate, it is a contractual requirement that you alert your managers/editors in these circumstances, and refer up the decision to them:

- Any proposal to bypass these Editorial Guidelines must be agreed in advance with the Head of Channel.
- If you have any doubts about the veracity of a story, or the provenance of a video recording, or if there is a risk of defamation, or concern about taste and decency in any material, you must refer to the Senior Editor on duty.
- Any material with exceptionally graphic scenes, such as violence, hanging, suicide, self-harm; or exceptionally strong language, must be referred to the Senior Editor on duty.
- If you are proposing to invite an exceptionally contentious figure as a guest on a programme, it must be agreed with the Executive Editor, News and Current Affairs.
- Any proposal to broadcast a serious allegation without giving those concerned an opportunity to reply must be referred to the Senior Editor on duty.
- Any ideas to make secret recordings, or broadcast any recording without consent must be approved by the Executive Editor, News and Current Affairs.
- Any approach to an individual or an organisation responsible for acts of terror to participate in our output must be referred to the Head of Channel.

- Any recordings made by perpetrators of a hijacking, kidnapping, hostage taking or siege must be cleared by the Head of Channel.
- Any proposals to work in hostile environments, or on high risk projects must be referred to the Executive Editor, Newsgathering.
- Any proposal to avoid visa restrictions when working in a country, or any other proposal to enter a country illegally, must be approved by the Executive Editor, Newsgathering.

2. Accuracy

Accuracy and finding out and reporting the truth are fundamental to our credibility. They are also requisite for our other editorial values. For instance, it's impossible for us to be fair or impartial without getting the facts right. Our output will be well sourced, based on sound evidence, and presented in clear, precise language. We will be honest and open about what we don't know and avoid unsubstantiated speculation.

- **Fact vs Opinion**

The core principle of responsible and accurate journalism is to differentiate clearly between what is fact and what is opinion. A fact is a fact, and can usually be proved objectively, regardless of who says it, but an opinion is usually based on a value judgement, that cannot be proved or disproved. Opposing opinions can sometimes be equally valid.

We rely, above all, on facts, and testing the facts for reliability. Our method of getting and presenting the facts will be as objective as possible, accepting that it may result in unexpected findings.

- **Verification**

We try, whenever possible, to verify facts by checking with primary sources: going to original documents or transcripts, checking with individuals who were directly involved or were a direct witness.

Accuracy requires meticulous attention to detail. This means checking and double checking facts whenever possible, even generally accepted information, and sometimes getting back to sources to make sure what they said is portrayed correctly, especially if another source is disputing it.

To “get it right” should always take priority over speed. There is no point in being fast and wrong.

- **Context**

Accuracy is not just about facts; it is about proper context. Facts can sometimes be inaccurate and misleading, if they are presented out of context. An essential part of editorial selection process is to decide what level of context is necessary for understanding the key elements of a story, and this context needs to be included to ensure accuracy.

It's particularly important in covering complex stories, or reporting major breaking news events, to be honest and clear about important facts that we don't know.

Presenting information clearly, concisely and effectively is an essential element of accuracy and reliable, fact-based journalism.

- **Live output**

Live content can be particularly challenging for accuracy, when facts are stated with little or no opportunity to verify. We update, correct or replace as quickly as possible if inaccurate information is included in live content.

- **Correcting mistakes**

If we make a serious factual mistake, we would normally acknowledge and correct it quickly and clearly. And if there is a complaint of unfairness as result of our error, we would explain what we got wrong and we would then put it right.

And we would apologise for any significant material error, particularly if/when our error has caused significant insult, reputational damage or other harm or offence to an individual or group of people.

- **Anonymous sources**

We should use unnamed sources with extreme care, and only if there is strong justification. If/when we agree not to identify the source, it does not mean a licence for putting out unreliable information or making unsubstantiated accusations. If the name of the source is withheld, we should provide the closest possible description to indicate its credibility, without giving away its identity.

- **Right of reply**

We need to be extremely careful and meticulous about making allegations against people and organisations. If/when we do, we should normally offer them the right to reply.

- **External providers**

We make sure that any content produced or presented by others on Iran international is as accurate and reliable as anything we produce in-house.

Attribution is an important tool of ensuring accuracy. If something is presented as a fact (as opposed to expert opinion) on a complex and specialised subject by an acknowledged expert, that can usually be considered as evidence for accurate and reliable content. But we are aware that expert opinion can differ, even on the same facts, and even the most experienced subject matter experts may sometimes present their opinions as if they were facts.

- **User generated content**

User generated content, including material on social media, or text, visual or audio content provided directly by users, should always be attributed as user generated content. If/when we incorporate any material by users into factual content, we should check to verify the accuracy of any facts presented in the UGC.

To summarise key points:

- gather content from primary sources, original documents, direct eye-witnesses wherever possible
- check and double-check facts
- ensure that content is well-sourced, based on evidence, and precisely presented
- examine thoroughly claims and allegations made by contributors wherever possible
- validate the authenticity and accuracy of any documentary evidence
- be transparent and honest about what we don't know
- avoid unfounded speculation
- try to attribute claims, allegations, and other content that cannot be corroborated
- never knowingly mislead our audiences.
- examine and corroborate eye witness accounts
- use anonymous sources with extreme care
- verify, when necessary, user generated content, and signpost it clearly
- normally identify sources of information
- seek response to significant allegations from the people or organisations concerned
- acknowledge serious factual errors and correct them quickly
- update, replace and correct if/when inaccurate information is included in live content
- provide proper factual context, which may be essential for understanding the information and/or ensuring that the audience is not misled.

3. Impartiality

Impartiality is a core value for Iran International. Impartial journalism is based on fact and evidence, without personal or political bias. In essence, impartiality is what separates journalism from propaganda.

Very simply, it means not taking sides, and providing a spectrum of view. This is not easy to achieve. We all have our own world views and our own perspectives on what happens around us, and perhaps no one is able to produce or consume journalism free of their own beliefs. Impartial and objective journalism is therefore not an exact science, and achieving it is a practical exercise, which rests on skill, experience and the right set of tools.

Impartiality is not the same as objectivity or balance or neutrality, nor it is the same as being fair, but it includes elements of all four.

- **Diversity of views, without prejudice**

Impartiality does not mean a simple binary balance between opposing viewpoints, or neutrality on contentious issues. It's not about soft and bland journalism and keeping a detached position on moral principles. It simply means avoiding prejudice for or against a particular argument. It's about challenging all assumptions and views, and allowing a breadth and diversity of opinion in our output.

And diversity of opinion is not only about political and cultural diversity. It's about all varieties of views and experiences, and all kinds of people and social groups - male and female, older and younger, urban and rural, poorer and wealthier, religious and secular, educated and uneducated, etc.

- **Impartial judgement**

Impartiality does not have to strip journalism of judgement if there is evidence to substantiate it. Impartiality does allow space to make judgment. Good journalism sometimes means being there to witness and testify what is happening, and to look closely at events and make a judgement about them. The critical point about impartiality is that it requires the judgement to be fair and formed after careful assessment of the events; to be based on evidence and to connect the evidence clearly to the conclusion.

Impartial journalism requires independence of mind, clear sourcing and evidence, accuracy and honesty, being fair and open-minded when examining the evidence and facts, weighting up all the relevant and diverse arguments, and presenting them without preconceptions or bias.

- **Balance**

This is a crucial element of impartiality, but impartial treatment of a subject does not mean always opposing one view with another. Or it does not necessarily require giving equal space or time to all perspectives or opinions. Some views may merit less or more time and space than others, justified by the weight of evidence. A key condition is that decisions about weight of perspectives are reasonable, consistent, and fair, and the debate remains open to other and opposing views.

The principle of impartiality applies to all subject areas and in all our output, but it's particularly important when covering major contentious questions, for instance in politics, religion, ethics, culture, science, finance, etc.

When covering this kind of issues, we would ensure a wide range of significant views and perspectives are reflected in the output, and opinion is clearly separated from fact. The refusal of one side in a story to offer any comment shouldn't be allowed to suppress reporting.

- **Impartiality over time**

Impartiality on complex issues can be achieved over time, in which case, we would need to consider carefully the timeframe for reflecting the different perspectives in a debate.

We can present diverse perspectives in different ways. We may need to ensure immediate balance within a single item or sequence of output, for instance in a story in a news bulletin.

In a breaking or developing story, it may take some time to cover all the relevant sides and perspectives, and we should aim to achieve impartiality over a longer timeframe, rather than a in single item or a bulletin.

In long-running stories, such as wars or election campaigns which develop over a long period, we have to ensure that over time all significant and relevant views are reflected and given proper weight; and the output is methodically assessed over a period to check that impartiality has been achieved.

- **Personal views of Journalists and contributors**

Our journalists and producers, particularly presenters and reporters, are the public face of Iran International. They have a significant impact on how our audience perceive us and whether they feel we are impartial. The audience should not be able to spot the personal views of our journalists when they are covering major political stories or contentious issues.

We must consider carefully the balance of views expressed on air by experts and other contributors (such as academics, commentators, journalists, researchers, representatives of charities, etc.) and should not assume that they are necessarily unbiased. We may sometimes need to signpost clearly that a contributor is associated with a particular viewpoint, or has a personal interest in what we

are covering, if/when this is not apparent from the context in which their views are expressed. If we are not certain of a contributor's views we should ask them before allowing them on air.

We must rigorously test contentious views expressed by contributors in interviews or other output, but we must also give them a fair chance to set out their arguments in reply to questions. We will also give appropriate space to minority views.

We should always be ready to challenge our own assumptions and commonly held views of our audience. These might be views on politics, race, religion, science, technology, nature, medicine or anything else. We may sometimes need to cover views that go against common consensus and could cause offence to many in our audiences. On such occasions, a senior editorial figure should be consulted.

- **Fair challenge**

We should ensure that we challenge and scrutinise not only those who are in government, or hold power, but also those who oppose them - opposition groups, lobbyists, campaigns, and others, including views expressed by the audience.

- **Use of Language**

Using precise and measured language is a key element of impartiality. When reporting war or emergencies (for instance acts of terror and disaster) it is particularly important to use precise language, report fully and responsibly, and make clear the source of information. We should try to convey the events and describe them in specific terms rather than using labels and clichés. If/when we use the terms "terrorist" or "terrorism" we should try to be consistent, and avoid double standards, which could undermine our reputation for objectivity and accuracy.

When reporting demonstrations and similar events, we should be particularly careful in quoting numbers of people involved. It's essential to report sources of information, and any wide disparities in figures from different sources. We should say clearly what we know as well as what we don't know.

- **Portrayal of people**

We should make references to people's sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity and age only where essentially relevant to the story. We should not encourage stereotyping – for example people who are disabled should not only ever appear because they are disabled; people from ethnic minorities only because of issues related to ethnicity or religion.

- **Content with personal views**

Iran International may offer a variety of content, in which a wide range of individuals, groups or organisations express a personal view, or a belief, or a contentious argument. For instance, a human rights campaigner arguing for a particular view, or a scientist putting across a theory, or a historian questioning a common interpretation of an event. All of these can help public understanding and debate, especially when they offer fresh and original perspectives on familiar issues.

Material with personal views must be clearly signposted. And if/when they cover controversial issues, we must make sure that they are factually accurate; they do not represent other views unfairly; and that opposing views too get a similar chance.

- **Opinion Polls**

We should be careful what opinion polls, questionnaires, and audience votes we choose to report in our output. It is essential that we examine the methodology rigorously and use appropriate context and precise language in reporting them. The audience must be able to trust the research, and our reporting of it.

To summarise the key practical points of impartiality:

- the essence of impartiality is to understand all the significant perspectives on any issue.
- the principle of impartiality applies to all subject areas and in all our output
- we should offer a diversity of perspectives so that, over time, no significant strand of thought is excluded or disproportionately represented.
- diversity of perspectives means not only political and cultural diversity, but all varieties of people, views, and experiences
- we should not unduly favour one perspective over another, but should offer a balance of views that follows the weight of evidence
- do not misrepresent any perspective
- do not imply that any perspective is the editorial opinion of Iran International
- scrutinise our own views and assumptions, as well as all those in our output
- assume nothing, and challenge conventional wisdom
- choose language that is clear and not emotive or derogatory.
- be as questioning or challenging of those with greater power as those without
- broaden the range of people that we use in the output
- make sure views and facts are not misrepresented
- signpost clearly any personal interest or particular viewpoint of contributors in what we are covering
- our journalists and content producers, particularly presenters and reporters should avoid expressing their personal views in their journalism and on air.

4. Use of Offensive content

We try to reflect the world as it is, and show all its realities. But we must always be conscious of public sensitivities and generally accepted standards. Our content may include material that could offend some of our audience. For instance, strong language, violence, sex, humiliation, distress, etc. But we must have a clear editorial purpose for carrying this material, and ensure that it is clearly signposted. We may carry challenging content, but we balance that with our responsibility to avoid unjustifiable offence.

How we determine accepted standards and the editorial justification to challenge them are a matter of judgement. Our responsibility to respect what is acceptable to public must be balanced with people's rights to freedom of expression and freedom to receive information.

Factual news reporting is a key element of what we offer on Iran international. Strong, striking and sometimes violent images are often a vital part of news coverage. We should use strong images of violence with care and only if it is essential to the proper understanding of the story. The principle applies equally to CCTV and footage shot on mobile phones which are readily available on social media. We should consider whether the images really add to the story.

It is essential that our content respects human dignity. We should be careful about using content that is unnecessarily cruel, intimidating, humiliating, or aggressive or derogatory, particularly in news and factual output.

We should consider warning the audience about exceptionally disturbing material before a report begins.

5. Fairness

We must try our best to be fair to everyone we deal with - our audiences, our contributors, and the people we cover in our output. What we produce should be based on respect, openness and honesty, and *avoid unjust or unfair treatment of individuals or organisations*.

We should treat our contributors honestly and with respect. We should normally make sure they give their consent before they take part in our output. We should explain to them the nature of the content and the kind of contribution they are asked to make, including whether it's live or recorded. They should also be told, whenever possible, who else will contribute and the range of views that are being included. And the final content should be a fair representation of their contribution.

If/when we refer to people or they appear in audio or visual material used in our output without their knowledge or consent, we should be accurate and fair in how we portray them, and where appropriate, respect their legitimate expectations of privacy.

If/when our output contains allegations against an individual or organisation, they should normally have a right of reply, unless there is an editorial justification for not offering it to them.

We should allow sufficient time for interviewees to answer questions or state their views, notwithstanding there will be situations where interruptions will be appropriate.

We may sometimes need to tell the audience if an invitation to contribute has been declined, and/or what we have done to include other views as appropriate.

6. Social media and public appearances

What we do as individuals on social media is becoming increasingly important, and sensitive at the same time, for our news gathering and reporting. The simple, and perhaps most sensible advice is not to post anything on social media that you would not publish or broadcast on Iran International.

Iran international journalist are expected to use social media responsibly, adhering to all our editorial principles, set out in these guidelines - accuracy, impartiality, fairness, etc. They are personally responsible for the content they publish on social networks. In particular they must not 'take sides' in any political debate or action, whether in Iran or regionally or globally.

Iran International journalists can post opinions but only provided they do not contradict these rules. And they should say 'my opinions not necessarily those of the channel'. An example might be an environment correspondent taking a view about the success of climate treaties, or a sports reporter having a favourite football team. But in general, if you can't say it in public on the channel, don't say it on social media even as an individual.

You should also bear in mind that things posted on 'closed forums' are often leaked into a wider universe, so these rules apply regardless of the platform or forum.

Any public appearance to represent Iran International, such as panel discussions, lectures, presenting awards ceremonies, should cleared in advance by your line manager.

A few points for good practice on social media:

- do not be offensive or use bad language
- do not undermine the work of colleagues by posting information which devalues their journalism.
- breaking news stories should be passed to the newsroom before they are posted on social media.
- do not post anything that contradicts stories on any of Iran International platforms

- do not comment on or disclose confidential information about Iran International (such as financial information, future plans or personnel matters).
- avoid arguments on social media.
- be aware that sharing a story could be perceived as an endorsement, even if you don't intend it.
- respect the law, particularly on defamation, privacy, discrimination, harassment and copyright

7. Removing material from Iran International news site

What we publish on the Iran International site will remain there permanently on the site and will not normally be removed, except in particular circumstances, for instance when there is a legal requirement, or a gross breach of our editorial standards, or a serious risk of causing harm or endangering someone's safety.

If/when we publish inaccurate content, it should be transparently acknowledged, and corrected or updated rather than removed. Sometimes a story develops and material which was accurate when it was published, subsequently becomes inaccurate, out of date, or misleading without new context. In all such cases too, the correct response is to update, amend or contextualise rather than remove.

We should consider removing content only if there is no other way to correct it. In such cases we should be transparent and explain the specific reason for removing or replacing it.

8. Law: Defamation, Contempt, Privacy, Copyright

What we do in Iran International is governed by UK law, and our journalists must have a reasonable understanding of the law, particularly defamation, privacy, contempt, and copyright. *The following are just a brief description their main points.*

- **Defamation**

We may defame someone if we "lower their reputation in the minds of right-thinking people", or if we make an "assertion which exposes anyone to hatred, ridicule or contempt".

What we broadcast or publish, including what our guests may say on air, is ultimately our responsibility and consequently our problem if it's defamatory.

There are a number of possible "defences" to defamation. They include truth (you must prove the comments are true); honest opinion (the opinion must be genuinely held and based on fact); and public interest.

Any story which can potentially be defamatory should be referred to the most senior editor on duty.

- **Privacy**

Everyone has a right to privacy, according to the Law, and can expect to have his or her private life respected. What we can record or report what people do in their private life, depends largely on their public profile and reputation, what makes them potentially news-worthy, and the nature of what we want to report.

We cannot and should not intrude in anyone's private life without their consent, unless there is an exceptionally strong reason. It must be warranted, usually by demonstrating that it is in public interest, to the extent that outweighs the intrusion. Any proposal to breach someone's privacy and/or carry out secret filming must, in any case, be authorised in advance by the Head of Channel.

We should be careful to protect against disclosing private addresses and/or personal family information (including photographs).

- **Contempt**

The law on contempt is designed to prevent reporting something which would prejudice a fair trial, by influencing jurors to think that a defendant might be guilty. Another example of contempt of court would be to interview a witness before a trial.

If no reporting restrictions are in place, we can legally report a trial, if we produce a fair and accurate account of what is said in the court. This may sound straightforward, but there are detailed and complex conditions to comply with, and we should always be very careful in reporting legal proceedings.

Some key points for reporting trials:

- do not report anything which implies the guilt or innocence of the accused, for instance other convictions, evidence of bad character or admissions of other crimes.
- do not criticise the Judge, Prosecutor or Defence, or the prosecution itself.
- do not predict the outcome of the trial.
- do not publish anything to identify members of the Jury
- do not interview actual or likely witnesses while proceedings are active.

- **Copyright**

The copyright law is designed to protect individuals or companies who create material from getting their work copied without permission. It also gives the owner of the copyright the exclusive right to control how these works are used.

The copyright law allows exceptionally, in limited circumstances, the use of material from other sources without infringing copyright. This is called fair dealing and can be used when reporting current events, or in film reviews, etc. But it does not mean we can put any video we like to air. For instance, photographs are excluded from the fair dealing defence. You should always take specific advice on each case.

9. Conclusion

These guidelines are a set of values and practices rooted in experience and common sense, rather than theoretical and abstract concepts. They contain many detailed rules, but they do not, by any means, cover every aspect of our work, nor are they in any way a substitute for the experience and professional qualities of our journalists.

There would be many exceptions to these guidelines, but their overarching principles will remain: to be honest and decent, fair, accurate, and open minded. And how our journalists do their work, and their personal standards of ethics are as important as any specific guideline for achieving these values.

The key message is, be decent and use your common-sense, and these guidelines will help you do the right thing.

IRAN INTERNATIONAL

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