

PANOS (London) Our editorial guidelines

These are the values and standards that we expect editor/mentors and journalists to adhere to when working with Panos London. They apply both to journalists producing content for Panos London, whether operating on its own or with other media support partners, and to journalists producing content for their own media outlets.

Our journalism:

- Seeks to stimulate, enhance or reflect informed, inclusive debate on development issues, and on issues where there are local/global linkages and impacts, particularly where these issues or developing-country angles on them are under-reported, misrepresented or poorly understood;
- Illuminates the voices, views and experiences of poor and marginalised people: these are the people who are generally most affected – and have first-hand knowledge and expertise – when policy-makers and other power-holders take – or fail to take – actions that have an impact on development. The reporting of their voices and views on issues that affect development is a critical aspect of holding both public and private sector power-holders to account.
- Questions the actions or lack of action of policy-makers and other power-holders on behalf of the people most affected by the impact of their decisions and actions.

Our reputation depends on providing information that can be trusted, and which engages and meets the needs of audiences. We observe the following journalism principles: accuracy, balance, impartiality and fairness, right to reply, independence and thoroughness.

Our journalism does not usually cover specific crime stories, elections, and covert investigations into political or corporate wrongdoing, and does not usually require secret recording. When we work in these areas, journalists and mentors need to consult the Panos London managing editor for more detailed guidelines on approach and possible pitfalls.

Accuracy

Journalists working with Panos London should strive to establish the truth of what has happened. They should assess all relevant facts and information to get at the truth.

Panos London content should be well sourced, accurate and presented in clear, precise language. Journalists working with Panos London should be honest and open about what they don't know, and avoid unfounded speculation.

Journalists should aim to achieve this by:

- Accurate gathering of material, using first hand sources wherever possible.
- Verifying and cross-checking information, facts and documents (particularly web-sourced information).
- Corroborating the evidence, claims and allegations made by sources and contributors.

Gathering information

Journalists working with Panos London should not rely on a single source. If they do rely on a single source, a named, 'on the record' source is always preferable. An agency report is only to

be relied upon if it is attributed to a reputable national or international news agency. First estimates of casualty figures often turn out to be inaccurate. If different sources give different estimates journalists should either report the range or go for the source which carries the greatest authority and attribute the estimate accordingly.

Status of information

Journalists working with Panos London must be careful not to mislead audiences and should not use language that implies greater credibility than the information deserves. For instance they should say that an opinion poll “suggests”, but never “proves” or even “shows”. In reporting research we should give the name of the organisation carrying out the research, the sample size and the nature of the sample. Journalists should not make broader claims from the research than the conclusions drawn in the research.

Identifying Sources

Journalists working with Panos London must keep a record of interviewees’ full names, age, where they are from and what they do. They should normally identify interviewees and contributors and provide their credentials if they are being interviewed for their expertise on an issue, so that audiences have as much information as they need in order to judge whether to trust them.

Where information comes from anonymous sources, journalists working with Panos London must keep accurate notes of agreements made. Journalists working with Panos London must be in a position to honour any proposed promise of anonymity, and should discuss this with their editor if necessary. When anonymity is agreed everyone must be clear about its extent. When anonymity is essential no document of any kind should identify a source.

Note-taking

Journalists working with Panos London should record their interviews with sources wherever possible, or, if recording is not possible, make accurate and reliable notes at the time, or as soon as possible afterwards. Journalists producing content for Panos London must keep records of all story research in a form that allows Panos London to check the information if necessary. When journalists are working in a language other than English, a record must be kept in both languages.

Defamation and libel

Accuracy is vital. UK law allows an individual to sue for damage to their reputation that they claim has been caused by published or broadcast content. Material is considered defamatory if it would tend to lower people’s estimation of them. In a defamation case Panos London would have to prove that the facts provided in the story are true. Hence it is vital that journalists producing content for Panos London always have excellent evidence to defend against defamation claims.

Balance, impartiality and diversity of opinion

We believe it is essential that debate on development issues includes the full range of opinions and experience. Poor and marginalised people almost always have the least media access and are thus often excluded from debate. Panos London therefore seeks to redress this imbalance.

Our stand on social exclusion and development does not mean compromising our journalistic integrity: journalists working with Panos London must bring impartiality and critical engagement to their work, and must be driven by the intrinsic merit of their stories, as an end in themselves. Our audiences must be confident that our editorial decisions are balanced, free of commercial, donor or political pressures, and free of any personal or political interests.

Journalists working with Panos London can explore or report on a specific aspect of an issue or provide an opportunity for a single view to be expressed, but in doing so they must not misrepresent opposing views or fail to give others a right to reply.

Personal views can range from the reflections of someone directly affected by the issue, to the outright expression of highly partial views by a campaigner, to the authored view of a specialist or professional including an academic or scientist. Where possible, audiences should also have an opportunity to contribute views. Fresh and original perspectives can add to public understanding and debate on well known issues. Content reflecting personal views, or authored by an individual, group or organisation, or contributed by audiences, should be clearly signposted as such.

Journalists working with Panos London must challenge contentious views expressed by sources or contributors, and the underlying facts, while allowing interviewees to set out their full response to our questions. They should not automatically assume that academics and journalist contributors are impartial and should make it clear to audiences when contributors are associated with a particular viewpoint. They should not promote any particular view.

Avoiding conflicts of interest

Our audiences need to be confident that none of our decisions are influenced by political or commercial pressures, or by any personal interest. We should make and be able to defend our editorial decisions on the basis that they are reasonable, and carefully and impartially reached.

Journalists who work with Panos London must strive to preserve independence from the subjects they report on. In no circumstances may a journalist working with Panos London accept gifts, payments or other benefits from the people or groups they report on. Journalists who accept gifts or payments open themselves to charges that their work is a paid advertisement for those sources, or that, at the very least, they are too close to these sources to cover them honestly.

Any offers to provide travel or other support to facilitate Panos London's coverage must be editorially justified and referred to the Panos London Managing Editor.

All political parties and governmental bodies seek to influence editorial decisions. Journalists working with Panos London must be on guard for "spin" from political parties and other interested parties, and should report the source of this spin when appropriate. They must be careful not to give undue prominence to any one political view or party and must not campaign or be used inadvertently to campaign. Non-governmental bodies also seek to convey their agendas through the media. Journalists must be alert to this and ensure that they do not favour any group above another.

Commercial companies may try to interest journalists working with Panos London in covering certain stories. Content must not endorse or appear to endorse any organisation, its products, activities or services. It should not give undue prominence to commercial products or services and must never include a product or service in sound or vision in return for cash, services or any consideration in kind.

Serving the public interest – interviewing public figures

Elected politicians and government officials who hold public office have a responsibility to account for their actions. We should ask searching questions of such figures, and scrutinise their actions and policies, in order to hold them to account and serve the public interest.

Interviewing poor and marginalised people

Sensitivity and trust is essential when interviewing poor and marginalised people, who are not expert in engaging with the media, and are often either ignored or portrayed in a stereotypical way by journalists. When interviewing poor, marginalised or vulnerable people it is even more important that they know how their contribution will be used and can make an informed decision about their participation and whether they need to be anonymous.

Journalists working with Panos London should take time to build trust with these interviewees in order that they feel sufficiently comfortable to set out their views and the realities of their lives. Journalists need to be open to asking less structured questions in this context, and to focus on people's life stories and experiences. It is through the telling of these authentic stories that the real gaps between political statements, public narratives and reality are clearly exposed. Particular sensitivity is needed when prompting for clarity on contradictions and areas of confusion.

Fairness

Panos London seeks to be fair to the people who feature in our content, to our contributors, to our audiences, and to other journalists and writers.

Journalists working with Panos London will be open, honest and straightforward in our dealings with contributors, sources and audiences, unless it is agreed with the Managing Editor that there is a clear public interest, or confidentiality issue that requires otherwise. The final content must represent what contributors have said fairly and truthfully. Similarly, contributors are expected to be honest, straightforward and truthful, and this should be made clear to contributors where necessary.

Consent

Journalists working with Panos London should obtain informed consent from our contributors in a variety of ways depending on the circumstances and extent of their contribution. Journalists working with Panos London must clarify the true nature and purpose of their interviews. Contributors should be told why they are being asked to contribute, where the content will first appear, and the kind of contribution they are expected to make. Journalists working with Panos London should not promise that content will definitely be published/produced, and where appropriate should make it clear that Panos London cannot control subsequent reproduction of the content.

Young people and some vulnerable adults may not be in a position to give informed consent. It is necessary to get the consent of a parent or guardian for children under 16 when interviewing them on sensitive issues.

We must consider carefully the impact and possible consequences of any material which involves a child, both during the production process and once the material has been published. This applies whether or not journalists have secured parental consent. Journalists producing content for Panos London should assess the risk that the process of participation and the impact of the completed contact might have on child participants, and proceed only once their editor is confident that measures are in place to ensure due regard for the welfare of the children participating.

Editorial control

Journalists working with Panos London should only give a broad outline of question areas prior to interview because the direction the interview takes will be dependent on what is said. Contributors sometimes try to impose conditions, or may refuse to give an interview unless questions are rigidly agreed in advance or certain subjects are avoided. Journalists producing content for Panos London must agree with the Managing Editor whether it is appropriate to proceed and how the conditions should be described in the content.

Journalists producing content for Panos London should not normally allow contributors to view content prior to publication or transmission. If permitted, this should be for editorial reasons only. It must be made clear that Panos London retains editorial control and that changes will result only from agreed factual inaccuracies or for reasons of personal safety.

No individual or group is obliged to agree to an interview. When audiences might reasonably expect to hear counter-arguments, or where an individual, viewpoint or political party is not represented, it may be appropriate to explain their absence. This should be done in terms that are fair to the missing contributor. It may be appropriate to represent their views based on what we already know.

Right of reply

When journalists make allegations of wrong doing or incompetence or criticise an individual or institution, those criticised should be given a “right of reply” – a fair opportunity to respond to the allegations before publication or transmission. Journalists working with Panos London should document the request they make for a response and the key elements of any exchange. Allegations must be described in sufficient detail to enable an informed response, and the response must be reported fairly and accurately.

Privacy

Journalists working with Panos London must respect an individual’s privacy and treat them fairly, while investigating and establishing matters which it is in the public interest to reveal. Private behaviour, correspondence and conversation should not be brought into the public domain unless there is a clear public interest in doing so.

Plagiarism

It is essential to credit the work of other content providers. Online content that refers to something on another website should be linked to it, not copied and pasted. If necessary, journalists should provide the name of the website, the date and a short summary of the content.

Correcting mistakes

Panos London has a policy of acknowledging serious factual errors and correcting mistakes quickly and clearly. Journalists working with Panos London must bring errors and mistakes to the attention of the Managing Editor as soon as they become apparent.

Portrayal

Harm and Offence

Journalists should take great care not to initiate or perpetuate prejudice, disadvantage and conflict in content produced for Panos London. Journalists working with Panos London should avoid offensive or stereotyped assumptions and ensure that people are only described in terms of their race, religion, gender, disability, physical or mental health, marital status or sexual orientation when clearly justified as relevant to the story. Journalists should be aware of national and regional sensitivities and conflicts, and avoid offensive or stereotypical reporting. Journalists working with Panos London should also be mindful of the risk of casting individuals as passive or helpless victims of circumstances.

Language

Panos London's credibility is undermined by the careless use of words which carry emotional or value judgments, or by adopting other people's language as our own. When reporting conflict, journalists working with Panos London should avoid value-laden words such as 'terrorist' or 'freedom-fighter' and use words which specifically describe the perpetrator, such as "attacker" or "gunman". Our responsibility is to remain impartial and to report in ways that enable our audiences to make their own assessments about who is doing what to whom. Journalists should also be mindful of the risks of providing a platform to hijackers, kidnappers or hostage takers.

<http://panos.org.uk/blogs-features/our-journalists/our-editorial-guidelines/>