

# Nebraska Educational Telecommunications

## Principles of Editorial Integrity and Independence

NET Radio, NET Television, NETNebraska.org

The Nebraska Educational Telecommunications Commission was created by the Educational Television Act, adopted by the State Legislature in 1963. In establishing the NETC, the governing body of many of NET's activities and services, the Nebraska Revised Statute 79-1316 addressed the matter of content on the service:

*“(11) To review, or cause to be reviewed by a person designated by the commission, all programs presented on the network prior to broadcast or transmission to insure that the programs are suitable for viewing and listening. Such suitability shall be determined by evaluating the content of the program, and screening the programs if necessary, as to their educational value and whether they enhance the cultural appreciation of the viewer and listener and do not appeal to his or her prurient interest. When it is obvious from an examination of the descriptive program materials that a program is suitable for presenting on the network, no further review shall be required.”*

Four years later, the national Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 was established, and sought to protect the editorial integrity of public media. It required the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to protect public media organizations from “interference with, or control of, program content or other activities” and also prohibited Federal government “direction, supervision or control over the content or distribution of public telecommunications programs and services.”

Historically, this mandate has been embraced by the public, government officials and others who support the editorial integrity of public broadcasting. Moreover, for First Amendment reasons, the American people are very sensitive to even the appearance of governmental interference with the content of television and radio programming. Any attempt by the government or interest groups to influence content, especially before a program has aired, raises serious Constitutional, statutory and policy concerns.

In 1985, a national committee for the Editorial Integrity Project drafted the “Statement of Principles of Editorial Integrity in Public Broadcasting”. Its goal was to “assist the trustees of public broadcasting licensee stations to fulfill their vital role in protecting the editorial integrity of public broadcasting in America.”

The fourth principle set forth in the Statement noted:

“Public broadcasting stations are subject to a variety of statutory and regulatory requirements and restrictions. These include the federal statute under which our licensees must operate, as well as other applicable federal and state laws. Public broadcasting is also cloaked with the mantle of First Amendment protection of a free press and freedom of speech. As trustees we must be sure that these principles are met. To do so requires us to understand the legal and constitutional framework within which our stations operate, and to inform and educate those whose position or influence may affect the operation of our licensees.”

An agreement between the University of Nebraska and the State of Nebraska went into effect in 2004 in which both institutions addressed the matter of editorial integrity and independence:

“5. It is agreed that content and programming will be free from undue or improper influence and the Commission and the University will adopt policies and procedures which will enable professional management to operate in a way which will give the public full confidence in the editorial integrity of Nebraska Educational Telecommunications programming.”

In 2007, in honor of the 40th anniversary of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, the major public media institutions of the United States reaffirmed the principles of editorial independence of public broadcasters.

To build on this reaffirmation, the Editorial Integrity for Public Media project was established the following year. This ongoing national collaborative is focused on bringing basic principles of editorial independence up to date with the latest developments in public media technology and practice:

“Trust is perhaps the most important asset public broadcasting carries forward into its evolving public media future. Audiences rely on our information and perspectives as they make decisions in their public and personal lives....We have built that trust by rigorous attention to editorial integrity — how we govern our organizations, raise funds for our programming, and produce our daily work. Nationally and locally, public broadcasters have crafted enduring principles, policies and practices to protect and advance our trust and integrity. These crucial guideposts are now tested by powerful and exciting changes in our field.”

Three institutions oversee and govern NET’s various services: the State of Nebraska, the University of Nebraska, and the NET Foundation for Radio and Television. These three partner institutions have recommitted themselves to protect the editorial integrity and independence

of NET content on all platforms of distribution, which are rapidly expanding. They include broadcasting, cable, satellite, digital, on demand, mobile, and social media.

Editorial integrity in this context is defined as the responsible application by professional practitioners of a free and independent decision making process ultimately accountable to the needs and interests of the citizens of Nebraska. It is the responsibility of the three partnering institutions to assure all Nebraskans that NET management has the editorial independence necessary to provide these services effectively across all platforms and that the mission of providing such high quality content remains paramount.

NET, as a public media institution, is subject to a variety of federal and state statutory and regulatory requirements. It is also protected by the First Amendment which guarantees a free press and freedom of speech. All institutions which may influence and affect the operation of NET are and will be committed to respect and follow the legal, constitutional, and ethical framework within which NET operates.

The judgment of NET's audiences about its programming, production, journalism and other content areas depends upon their confidence that all content is free from undue or improper influence. The three partner organizations are committed to maintaining the full confidence of the public in the editorial integrity of this content.

Finally, NET depends upon funds provided by the Federal Government, the State of Nebraska, the University of Nebraska, and by individual and corporate contributions. Through conformance with sound fiscal and management practices, NET will continue to meet the requirements of all funding sources, while avoiding inappropriate use of otherwise legitimate oversight procedures to distort the programming process which such funding supports.

The general precepts outlined in the sections below address the components of both daily activities, as well as long-range plans, at NET, and provide guidance to those in governance roles, as well as NET staff and leadership. We derive these on the foundations of NET:

The mission of Nebraska Educational Telecommunications is to enrich lives and engage minds, connecting communities and celebrating Nebraska with services that educate and enlighten.

On this basis, we make a commitment that NET's services and practices support a strong civil society, increase cultural access and knowledge, extend public education, and strengthen community life through electronic media and related community activities. The public's trust in NET, its content, services, and relationships is fundamental to achieving these purposes.

## **Earning the Public's Trust**

For the ninth consecutive year, the American public has rated PBS the most trustworthy institution among nationally known organizations and institutions. The national research has confirmed that PBS is considered to be the most fair network for news and public affairs.\*

The public's trust is the most important asset NET carries forward into its evolving public media future. Nebraskans rely on NET's information and services as they make decisions in their public and personal lives. NET believes that the public media occupy a unique space in our culture. Public media offer a non-partisan editorial safe harbor, where there is a constancy of purpose and an unfailing allegiance to truth, accuracy and fairness. To these ends NET is pledged to these core principles:

- NET is committed to accuracy, fairness and balance in all of its content creation regardless of subject area or distribution platform.
- NET is committed to avoiding even the perception of undue funder influence over any of its distribution decisions or original content creation.
- NET's standards apply to all the content it produces and presents, regardless of subject matter. These standards apply across all the channels and platforms NET uses including, but not limited to broadcasting, online, social media, print, and in-person events.

## **Journalism That Reports Events and Issues with Accuracy and Integrity**

NET pursues facts about events and issues and reports these matters with accuracy and integrity. NET takes responsibility for the validity of the content it presents, and operates within a system of defined professional principles, ethics and practices.

Content decisions are made in compliance with all legal requirements and applicable industry ethical guidelines, under which NET maintains editorial independence in the creation of all content. Editorial and journalistic functions and decision-making operate freely from any undue influence from business, marketing, or funding functions within NET.

NET's news content, whether on the radio, television, on the web, or in any other form, must attain the highest quality and strengthen the credibility of NET News. NET journalists conform their activities to the most current ethical guidelines developed by NPR, with additional guidance from the Radio Television Digital News Directors Association (RTDNA).\*\*

\* Research conducted in January - February, 2012, by the independent, non-partisan research companies Harris Interactive and ORC Online Caravan. Each year, PBS commissions research to measure its performance and value as judged by its most important stakeholder – the American public.

\*\*Journalism codes of ethics:

<http://ethics.npr.org/>

[http://www.rtdna.org/article/rtdna\\_code\\_of\\_ethics](http://www.rtdna.org/article/rtdna_code_of_ethics)

## Transparency in Funding

NET's radio and television stations are licensed by the Federal Communications Commission as Non-Commercial Educational (NCE) stations and adhere to the FCC's regulations concerning underwriting. The NET stations also follow the standards set for corporate support by PBS and NPR.

NET aims for respectful relationships with all of its donors and a clear understanding among donors and others about its fundraising operations. NET acknowledges the funders of its programming and discloses the terms on which it obtains such support, in accordance with all appropriate governing laws and regulations.

NET seeks and accepts financial support from a wide variety of donors, funders, underwriters, and partners. NET believes that the citizens of Nebraska have the right to expect and demand that it will not allow those financial or other relationships to deform or corrupt the pursuit of NET's overall editorial goals or mislead the public in any way.

These are the key components of how NET practices transparency in fundraising:

- NET communicates directly and explicitly with donors about its editorial standards that bring rigor and integrity to our work, the legal requirements that surround our donor relationships, and the boundaries between funders and our editorial process. NET also reviews funding credit language to ensure compliance with both FCC, PBS, and internal NET funding guidelines.
- NET discloses, on air or online as appropriate, the funders of specific programs, areas of coverage, or other activities. We acknowledge any person or organization that gives us money or other valuable consideration to broadcast specific content. Additionally, persons or organizations that have provided substantial funding are disclosed when they become the subject of a news story or other program. NET discloses the relationship in the program or in an announcement adjacent to it, whether or not the donation was in support of the story or program.
- NET reserves the right to refuse any donation for any reason, including, but not limited to, perceived conflicts of interest, potential audience misconception regarding a funder's role or influence, and perceived impact on our reputation, integrity, or fundraising ability.
- NET reports the overall costs of fundraising, including personnel, consultants, special events, and related support costs. This reporting is part of our overall disclosure of revenue and expenses in our public file as part of our Annual Financial Report to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and to the

Internal Revenue Service through a Form 990. It provides information on NET's mission, programs, and finances, as well as how NET's budget is broken down between program, management, and fundraising expenses.

NET reviews the propriety of prospective funders on a case-by-case basis, using the framework outlined below.

- Ongoing News and Information Programming - NET exercises close scrutiny when deciding who can fund, sponsor, or otherwise underwrite ongoing news and information programming. It is especially cautious with respect to potential funders whose principal purpose or agenda is to bring about a specific political outcome or to influence public policy on controversial matters that are the current subjects of NET's ongoing news coverage.
- Specials, Documentaries and Information Programs - In addition to effective safeguards that separate funders from editorial decisions, NET will ensure that it does not undermine its credibility by accepting support for specific programs from organizations whose participation would raise serious concern about its editorial independence. NET therefore weighs the potential for appearance of conflict, while carefully avoiding any actual conflict. In making these assessments, NET occasionally considers whether support from multiple organizations, with multiple perspectives and interests, is appropriate when funding from any one such organization, alone, would not be. NET does not accept funding that would obligate it to provide coverage of a topic that it would not have covered with general funds, or that requires more extensive coverage than the topic's value or importance warrants.

## Partnerships and Collaborations

NET invites Nebraska's non-profit and mission oriented organizations to join in partnerships that deliver new informational and educational programs to the citizens of Nebraska.

NET brings its standards into these collaborations through which it expands its capacity to serve, add to the perspectives shared with its audiences, and enhance the timeliness and relevance of its work. NET looks for mutual alignment in the motivation and goals of potential partners and collaborators.

NET maintains its defined editorial standards when partnering with other entities. NET identifies and articulates its principles, policies, and practices to all stakeholders in partnerships and other collaborations.

NET discloses its editorial partners and provides to the public a brief description of each partner's roles and responsibilities. The form and frequency of these acknowledgements and disclosures will vary with the character of the relationship and the editorial content or activity that it produces.\*

\*Detailed standards and practices are found at About NET Public Media which includes Editorial Guidelines and Production Guidelines: <http://tinyurl.com/azsjpg5>

