

Pack 104, Item 8

Type: Broadcaster-how-to

August 2016

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**F.A.I.R. journalism standards for farmer programs** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Introduction**

In 2008, Farm Radio International introduced the V.O.I.C.E. Program Standards for farmer programs. The V.O.I.C.E. Standards help radio broadcasters produce programs that provide useful information, give farmers an opportunity to voice their opinions, and attract large, engaged audiences. FRI also created a checklist that broadcasters can use to evaluate episodes of their farmer program, using the V.O.I.C.E. Standards. (You can find the V.O.I.C.E. Standards and checklist [here](http://www.farmradio.org/radio-resource-packs/101-getting-and-using-audience-feedback-and-evaluating-radio-programs/use-voice-standards-to-improve-your-farmer-program/).)

Farm broadcasters also need to meet *journalism* standards. Broadcasters serve their listeners well when their program broadcasts accurate information about an important subject—like when to plant, or how to mix fertilizer, or who to call in an emergency. Broadcasters also serve listeners well when they present all sides of a controversial issue. Listeners will reward a trustworthy radio station—one that provides accurate information and a range of opinions—with their loyalty.

FRI wants to help broadcasters earn the trust of their listeners. That is why we are introducing the F.A.I.R. Journalism Standards for farmer programs. We hope that broadcasters find this tool helpful. We encourage you to give us feedback about the F.A.I.R. Standards so that we can improve them over time. Please send your comments to radio@farmradio.org.

**F.A.I.R. Standards in brief for farmer program broadcasters**

Here are the Standards, and the statements that a farm broadcaster should be able to make when applied to their work:

**Fairness and balance:** My stories and programs are fair and balanced. I present a range of opinions, and I respect the right of my listeners to hear all sides of a story.

**Accuracy:** The information I broadcast is factual, based on research. I present all available relevant facts, and I make it clear what is opinion or viewpoint and what is fact.

**Integrity:** I act with personal integrity and rarely take a position on issues, especially when an issue is controversial. If I take a position, it is only to stimulate debate. If I have a personal stake in an issue, I make this known on air. And if my radio station has a position on an issue, I make that known on air too.

**Respect:** I respect the listeners who produce food for their families and the public, often under difficult circumstances. I respect the diversity of my audience and show no bias on the basis of gender, race, age religion, ethnic group, culture, belief, or any other factor. I treat all guests and contributors with respect, and my programs demonstrate a deep respect for my audience.

**FAIR Standards expanded**

**Fairness and balance:** *My stories and programs are fair and balanced. I present a range of opinions, and I respect the right of my listeners to hear all sides of a story.*

Fairness and balance are at the heart of every good information program and newscast. My audience expects this and wants to know all relevant information and viewpoints, especially on controversial or important issues. Ideally, a good farmer broadcast presents all sides of a controversial story in a fair and impartial way which allows listeners to make their own judgments.

However, it is not always possible to achieve balance in a single program because of time constraints, unavailability of guests, or other issues. When that is the case, I will achieve balance over a number of programs—one episode might present one side, while the next episode presents another.

Being fair and balanced does not mean that I accept every opinion without challenging it. In fact, fairness and balance often require that I ask tough and fair questions, ones that challenge popular or long-held beliefs, or positions held by important people.

Fairness also means that I act in an encouraging manner towards guests who have an important part of the story to tell, but who are uncomfortable on the radio or not accustomed to being asked their opinion.

I may need to protect the identity of someone who believes that they will be harmed if they speak out. In these cases, I will not identify the speaker. However, I will make sure that the person has a legitimate claim to make their statement, and that their request not to be identified is justified. In such cases, I will discuss the situation with another person at the station who is well-trusted and reliable and has integrity as a journalist, before making a decision.

I will be careful about broadcasting extreme opinions, especially ones that might provoke hatred against a group or person, or that promote violence. There is no place for that in a fair and balanced farmer program. Regrettably, radio can be extremely effective at stirring up hatred and violence, and it can be tempting to do so. This kind of broadcasting behaviour is a serious violation of FAIR journalistic standards. If a guest says something on air that could provoke hatred or violence, I will not let it pass by. I will challenge the guest, and, if the guest is not prepared to withdraw the offending statements, I will cut the interview short.

While I will be careful about giving air time to extreme opinions, I will consider finding time in my programming to sensitively examine the roots of hatred or violence.

There are special circumstances where fairness and balance need even more attention than usual, such as during an election. For example: there may be an important farming issue in an election campaign, and different candidates may have varying opinions and offer different solutions. I must present those varying views and promises in a balanced way. If my station is owned by a candidate for public office or a party official, I will tell my listeners this information.

Fairness and balance require judgment. For example, there may be two or three main candidates who have a good chance of winning office in an election. There may also be five or six other candidates who do not have a reasonable chance of winning. I must use my good judgment to decide how much coverage I will provide to the “main” candidates and how much to candidates with less chance of winning. For the sake of my listeners, I will cover the main candidates as well as possible. However, I will also cover the positions of other candidates.

I also demonstrate fairness, balance, and good judgment in my call-in shows and vox pop interviews. It is always good to hear spontaneous and interesting views freely given. But it is important to remember that call-ins and vox pops are *not* scientific surveys. If, during a call-in, all five callers express the same opinion, this does not mean that *everyone* shares that opinion. It just means that the five people who happened to call at that time have the same opinion. These calls might very well be from people who are wealthier than average, as well as literate and male. (These are the people who often participate in call-ins). I will make regular efforts to reach people who are less likely to call in, for example through field visits. (This is discussed further in the *FRI Broadcaster how-to guide on call-ins*, available [here](http://www.farmradio.org/radio-resource-packs/102-raising-guinea-fowl/bh2-how-to-create-an-effective-call-in-program-2/).)

If a call-in topic is important or controversial, but the calls do not reflect the existing range of opinion on that topic, I will find a way to air the other sides of the story in other programs.

While I strive for fairness and balance, I work on a radio program that takes a supportive attitude towards small-scale farming and healthy rural life. However, that support includes providing a range of opinions on all matters of importance to small-scale farmers and rural citizens.

**Accuracy:** *The information I broadcast is factual, based on research. I present all available relevant facts, and I make it clear what is opinion or viewpoint and what is fact.*

Facts matter. I do research to ensure that I can broadcast the most important and relevant facts on a topic. For example, in my weather reports and market reports, I check to ensure that the information I offer is as accurate and up-to-date as possible and comes from a reliable and trustworthy source. (If the information is wrong or out-of-date, I know it will reflect badly on the trustworthiness of my program and my station.)

When I gather information from another person, I use my judgment—and conduct research as needed—to decide whether that person’s observations are true or not.

Whenever possible, I will say where I got the information that I provide, and identify any bias the source holds.

For instance, if I cover a story about a farmers’ demonstration that is promoting road improvements, I will not say that there were 200 demonstrators unless I was there and counted them, or unless someone I trust was there and counted them or made a realistic estimate. Otherwise, I will say that, “According to observers, there were 200 demonstrators.” Or, better still, “Protest organizers put the number at 200,” if it was the organizers who provided the figure.

Of course, there is nothing better for accuracy than to be able to say: “I was there and this is what I saw.”

Facts are my friends. They give my stories and my program credibility and impact. For instance, if I am doing a story on how climate change is affecting the growing season for local farmers, I could simply say that, “The growing season has been affected by climate change over the past 10 years.” But it will be much more dramatic and effective if I can say: “The weather statistics over the last 10 years show a 40 per cent drop in rainfall for the area, and a growing season that is two months shorter.”

I will deal carefully with widely-held beliefs. For instance, there have been many false claims of a cure for HIV and AIDS over the years, and some have been widely believed. Another example: Many farmers believe that burning crop residues is good for soil fertility. And there is some evidence that this is true. But most scientific research suggests that burning residues usually has a negative effect on soil fertility. Another example: There is a new variety of disease-resistant cassava that can help Ugandan farmers manage some serious diseases. Somehow, a rumour was spread that the new variety causes cancer. The rumour was completely untrue, but it became very popular. To meet accepted journalistic standards, a station airing a program on this variety of cassava would need to use facts and evidence to challenge the myth that it causes cancer.

In situations like these, I will check facts, consult experts, and name untrue claims as such. That is why, after researching the issue, I might say that, “The best available evidence suggests that burning crop residues usually harms soil fertility and decreases crop yields over the long-term.” But I will do this in a way that respects my listeners. They need the best available information, but they don’t need to feel like I am judging them.

I will remind myself that experts state what they and their agricultural colleagues have found to be true most of the time. They may also be providing their own opinion, or the opinion of a business or government that employs them. When appropriate, I will ask experts for the evidence behind their statements.

Stereotyping is a related problem. For example, some people hold the opinion that that all West African pastoralists are Fulanis, and that Fulanis cause problems for rural farmers. Fulanis and their livestock are sometimes accused of every bad thing that happens in an area, including rape on farms, armed robbery on highways, and deliberate or accidental destruction of crops. This is a set of stereotypes that is unfair and harmful. It is vital to avoid stereotyping anybody or any kind of group—ethnic, cultural, religious, or otherwise. When reporting, I will stick to the facts as I know them, and take care to avoid reinforcing stereotypes.

I help my listeners understand the difference between facts and opinion on important issues. Opinions are a valued and vital part of my farmer programs. Opinions reveal how specific people and groups feel about certain topics, and how they might act on them. However, it is my first duty to make sure my audience knows the important facts on an issue, and the balance of evidence about it.

I will challenge and push for facts in interviews. As my listeners’ representative, I will ask questions that the farmers in my audience would ask. So, if a seed company claims that a certain variety of seed doubles yield, I will ask for proof of that claim. If an extension worker says that a new variety or a new kind of tillage increases farmers’ yields, I will ask for the evidence.

**Integrity:** I act with personal integrity and rarely take a personal position on issues, especially when that issue is controversial. If I take a position, it is only to encourage debate. If I have a personal stake in an issue, I make this known on air. And if my radio station has a position on an issue, I make that known on air too.

I will strive to be neutral, impartial, and fair in all my programming. I will work for the good of the community, seek the truth, report it with integrity and independence, and be accountable for my actions.

I will be particularly careful if I have a personal stake in a controversial issue, since this will make it difficult for me to appear unbiased. If there is something in my personal background or history that is relevant to such an issue, I will state it up front. For example, if I used to work for a company that is selling a new agricultural product, I will tell my audience. If my sister or even a distant family member is leading a protest which is fighting for higher market prices for farmers, I will mention that too.

Even if I have expert knowledge, I know that my main task as a host or interviewer is to gather facts and opinions from *other people* and get them on air.

Sometimes I might state a position on a controversial issue simply to stimulate a discussion, or to uncover more information. In these cases, I will try to distance myself from the opinion. For example, in a discussion with the manager of a health clinic, I might say, *“So you are telling me that if I am a young woman with “severe pains in her pelvis,” there is nothing you can do for me at your clinic. Is that correct?”*

Integrity means that I will not only tell the audience what I *know*, but also what I *don’t know*. For instance, if I am doing a story about wells that are contaminated by a poisonous chemical, I will tell the audience how many wells are affected, and anything else worthy of being reported. But I will also tell my audience that I don’t yet know the source of the contamination, or whether or not it is spreading. I will also tell my listeners that I will keep working on the story.

My integrity and credibility are especially important in dramatic and emotional stories where gossip and rumour may try to pass as fact. For example, there is a completely false yet popular rumour that eating a great deal of orange-fleshed sweet potato can correct very poor eyesight. Another rumour that passed as fact was mentioned above—the cassava variety that supposedly caused cancer.

Sometimes, I will not be able to find a person to represent one side of a story about a controversial issue. In that case, I will let my audience know what actions I took to try to find such a person, and that I will keep on trying.

I will also state the reason why an invited guest is not on the program. And while it might be a fact to say that “Minister X said she would not be interviewed for our program,” it shows integrity and fairness to add: “because she is attending her daughter’s wedding.”

It is possible that my guest may have simply forgotten that he or she was scheduled to talk to me on air at this time. I will give the guest the benefit of the doubt, and keep trying to reach them. If my calls do not go through, I will tell my audience that I will keep trying to interview the guest.

Sometimes, after speaking with local farmers, my radio station and my program might take a position on a specific farming practice. For example, my station might decide to use a program to promote a specific agricultural practice, such as interplanting beans with maize, or a better composting method, or a way to store maize so that pests can’t destroy the harvest. In cases like these, I will tell the audience that we are taking a position, and the reasons for that decision. And I will identify the programming that will reflect that position. But I will continue to provide a range of opinion about that particular farming practice in that programming.

**Respect:** *I respect the listeners who produce food for their families and the public, often under difficult circumstances.* *I respect the diversity of my audience and show no bias on the basis of gender, race, religion, age, ethnic group, culture, belief, or any other factor.*

The relationship between my program and its audience is a special one, built on a contract which is unspoken and unwritten. I agree to make a program that is interesting, relevant and fair, and my listeners agree to listen and interact, and possibly to act on what they have heard. It is a contract of mutual respect. I demonstrate that respect by presenting a wide range of stories and opinions, and by being personally unbiased and open to ideas and even unpopular opinions.

I treat my guests and contributors fairly and with respect. They know why they have been invited to the program, and what they will be asked to talk about so that they have time to prepare. This does not mean that I will not ask my guests tough questions. Just the opposite. As the representative of my listeners, I will ask the challenging questions that are on my listeners’ minds. I will do that while also being courteous to my guest.

From time to time, everyone makes mistakes. When I make a mistake on-air, I will admit it on-air as soon as I can. This is a mark of respect for my audience, and part of my contract with my listeners.

If someone makes a complaint about my program, I will respond as soon as possible. If the complaint is serious, I will take the matter up with my station management.

**Where else can I learn about journalistic standards?**

* The British Broadcasting Corporation, undated. *Editorial Guidelines*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines>
* The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, undated. *Journalistic Standards and Practices*. <http://www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/en/reporting-to-canadians/acts-and-policies/programming/journalism/>
* National Public Radio (NPR), undated. *NPR ethics handbook*. <http://ethics.npr.org/>
* Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2011. *ABC Editorial Policies—Principles and Standards*. <http://about.abc.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/EdPols2015.pdf>

## Acknowledgements

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With contributions from Doug Ward, Chair, Board of Directors, FRI; Sylvie Harrison, Radio Craft Development Team Lead, FRI; Vijay Cuddeford, Managing editor, FRI; Kevin Perkins, Executive Director, FRI; Edwin Kumah Drah, FRI Ghana Radio Craft Officer; and Rosemary Gaisie, Ghana Broadcasting Corporation and FRI trainer.

 Project undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada (GAC)