



# The American Agora

**Code of Ethics**

December 6, 2020

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## I. Mission Statement

The American Agora is a forum for analysis, commentary, and other forms of written discourse with regard to domestic affairs, foreign affairs, economic affairs, and on-campus affairs at American University. The Agora regularly publishes opinion articles on political, economic, or social topics written by both guest writers and staff writers. The Agora publishes investigative reporting on occasion, typically relating to campus matters that have gone unreported by other on-campus news organizations. The American Agora is not affiliated with American University in any other capacity than as a student media organization. Opinions published within newsletters, papers, or digitally are of the authors and the authors themselves, and shall not be construed to represent the positions of the University nor the Agora as an organization, unless quoted as such or specified.

## II. Journalistic Ethics

### Opinion Substance

- The American Agora considers all non-anonymous article submissions of all lengths, area subjects, and origins (see “Confidentiality” for anonymous article submissions). Factors and benchmarks that determine the eligibility of an article to be formally published include but are not limited to: quality of writing, academic tone, provenance of research, and depth of analytical insight.
  - Quality of Writing: the author must demonstrate they are proficient with written language, are able to write with precision and conciseness, possess an understanding of opinion writing structure, and an ability to apply their own distinct voice to the subject.
  - Academic Tone: the author must demonstrate an understanding of the conventions of academic writing. They must establish that they possess a comprehension of what academic writing looks and sounds like.
  - Research: the author must present adequate empirical evidence, factual detail, or other forms of substantiation alongside their thesis and its components. (See the adjoining section on “polemics” for narrow-focus opinion writing in reaction to a single event or other recent phenomenon.)
  - Analytical Insight: the author must present an opinion that enhances the conversation they wish to enter with a new or significant point of view. Alternatively, they may introduce an issue they believe is not receiving enough publicity.
  - Satire articles are excluded from these guidelines due to their nature. Standards for satire will be determined on a case-by-case basis according to tone of voice.
- Polemics: the Agora will publish pieces of a polemic nature relating to both on and off-campus affairs, granted the material a) rests on a legitimate and substantive basis, and b) is

determined through a rigorous review process by the editorial board to not be expressly malicious in tone.

- The Agora does not publish emotionally infused, unsubstantiated, opinionated “hit pieces” on campus figures, such as individual students, professors, employees, or university administrators.
- Composed op-ed writing or journalistic reporting regarding on-campus figures such as individual students, professors, employees, or members of the administration, will be considered. The aforementioned standards for substance, legitimate basis, and tone will still apply.
- Polemic articles directed at other student-led clubs and organizations on campus will be subject to a special review process by the editorial board with more critical considerations on unnecessarily malicious tone and substantive/legitimate basis.
- Polemic articles directed at university-affiliated institutions such as AU Student Government or the Board of Trustees will be treated as conventional article submissions and be subject to our standards on writing, tone, research, and insight.
- In assessing the qualifications of polemic articles targeting off-campus public figures, the Agora will rely on its basic standards of writing, tone, research, and insight, as off-campus public figures are classified as more “exposed” than on-campus individuals and organizations to polemic attack, and are therefore better prepared and insulated.
- Regarding cases that are unclear given all the aforementioned cases, editors will convene to determine whether such an article’s merits pass muster for publication. The Editor-in-Chief reserves the right to determine suitability for final publication.

### **Investigative and Informative Reporting**

- The Agora does not have a regular news reporting schedule like The Eagle. However, the Agora will publish news reporting if it uncovers a pertinent development that has not yet been reported on by campus media outlets.
- The Agora will publish a news article if it conducts in-depth, worthwhile research into a development that has already been reported on. For example, if The Eagle reports on a financial announcement made publicly by the university CFO, the Agora may review relevant accounting documents and audits by ratings agencies to paint a bigger picture.
- The Agora requires that new developments given in spoken interviews that have not been reported by other campus publications be verified by the writer themselves in addition to a member of the editorial board, as well as the Editor-in-Chief. See the section on “Confidentiality” for details on anonymous sources and interviews.
- The Agora does not accept journalistic reporting from anonymous writers who are not on the Agora’s staff. See “Confidentiality” for details on anonymously submitted articles.
  - The Agora will consider journalistic reporting from self-identified writers who are not on the Agora’s staff, in which case the editorial board will convene to determine the submission’s validity by confirming sources and evidence.

### **Journalistic Conduct**

- Citations: Whenever possible, sources to claims made within opinionated articles will be identified. Digital sources will be hyperlinked; non-digital sources will be attributed appropriately in-sentence. Images may be linked or reprinted with attribution.
  - A lack of a citation due to unavailability or omission of source material will be replaced with alternatives, such as a screenshot or photograph if available.
  - In the case there are no avenues for direct citation, such as an anonymous source, the editor will first confirm the reference and then insert a note in the article explaining and justifying the validity of a given claim. The author should be doing this before submitting their article as well.
- Plagiarism: Any attempt by an author to pass off another person's work as their own is expressly prohibited and can result in disciplinary action.
- Double publication: The Agora will publish an article that has been published elsewhere, as long as the previously published article has been written by the same author. The Agora will not seek to double-publish articles, but will accept submissions of this nature.

## Hate Speech

- As a forum for opinionated writing, the Agora may be presented with a submission that either directly and indirectly includes hateful rhetoric. The Agora notes that material hate speech is by nature antithetical to the Agora's standards on quality of research, academic tone, and analytical insight.
- The Agora does not in any sphere tolerate hate speech, which we understand to be defined as the employment of slurs, stereotypes, or other false narratives associated with a certain race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, culture, sexuality, or gender identity used by a writer as a tool for advancing their own argument. Articles of this nature will by-and-large be automatically rejected upon submission.
  - The Agora will only permit the publication of hateful rhetoric if it is being used in reference. The Agora strongly discourages its writers from directly quoting hate speech and instead encourages paraphrasing without repeating offensive language.
  - The direct reference of slurs, stereotypes, or other false narratives will be permitted if and only if referenced in direct quotation, or if necessary to provide important information. Writers are strongly encouraged to discard quotations that include slurs and seek alternatives unless absolutely pertinent to the article, in which case the editorial board will determine the level of such pertinence.
  - In the case of particularly contentious pieces, members of the editorial board will convene to conduct a rigorous collective review and discussion. The Editor-in-Chief determines final publication.
- No slur will ever be spelled out, regardless of whether it is in the form of a quotation or not. The Agora does not censor "swear" terms, but to use "fuck" as an example, the Agora will employ asterisks to censor an epithet: "f\*\*\*".
- Satire exception: the use of racial, sexual, gender identity, religious, or cultural epithets in satire articles is permitted without censorship so long as the author using those terms is of the background to which the epithet refers. If this is not the case, the piece will not satisfy

the Agora's standards with regard to hate speech as it is not the prerogative of individuals not belonging to a group to deem what is and what is not harmful or prejudicial to that group.

- The Agora does not permit the basis of written arguments on narratives historically or politically derived from or linked with hateful origins. For instance, the Agora would not publish an article that non-satirically references as a source QAnon, a conspiracy theory that frequently employs and resorts to antisemitic attacks. Outside the Agora's hate speech standards, under no circumstances would such an article satisfy our standards on research, insight, and academic tone.
- The Agora does not publish articles on research based in bigotry masquerading as empirics, such as race science or eugenics. The employment of such evidentially deficient pseudoscience would also fail to satisfy the Agora's standards on research, insight, and academic tone.
- Articles that fail to satisfy the aforementioned standards on hate speech do not fulfill the tone, research, or insight standards to which all article submissions are subject.

## Confidentiality

- In the absence of reliable sources who are willing to go on record, the Agora will use confidential sources. All sources will be named unless a) the source themselves wishes not to be named, or b) there is a good reason to exclude a source's name.
  - The Agora staff takes confidentiality very seriously and will not reveal the identities of an anonymous source or anonymous writer to friends, family, members of the administration, members of the AU student body, legal bodies, intelligence agencies, or members of law enforcement in the absence of a legal, binding subpoena or other such court order.
    - Under Washington, D.C.'s "shield laws," members of the news media are protected from being compelled to reveal information pertaining to confidential sources, as long as the journalist in question is working in the pursuit of official business. As a student media organization, a broad view of these "shield laws" by the Student Press Law Center is assumed to cover our paper. It should be noted that there has never been a notable court case involving these circumstances and a college media organization, so there is no precedent for this type of event. However, the Washington, D.C. Superior Court ruled in the case *Prentice v Mcphilemy*, 27 Med. L. Rptr. 2377, 2381 (1999) that the law applies to non-traditional sources of news, such as photjournalists or writers not associated with a major news organization. Those seeking to review the District's shield laws can find them compiled and discussed here: <https://www.rcfp.org/privilege-compendium/district-of-columbia/#2-others-including-non-traditional-news-gatherers>
  - In the event of an extraordinary situation requiring immediate identification by intelligence or law enforcement agencies of an individual for severe and imminent safety reasons, such as bomb threats or other threats of harm, the Editor-in-Chief

and the Executive Board reserve the right to preserve public safety and breach confidentiality.

- Anonymous Interview Sources: to qualify for publication, any confidential source used in Agora reporting will need to have their identity known to at least one member of the editorial board or executive board. The source must be confirmed as reliable by both the author of the article and an editor in order for their testimony or statements to be published. If the author of the article is an editor themselves, they must seek confirmation from another editor.
- Anonymous Article Submissions: the identity of an author must be known and confirmed to at least one member of the editorial board or executive board to be considered.
- Anonymous Staff Articles: members of the Agora staff may publish articles anonymously. This must be adequately and explicitly explained and justified to the Editor-in-Chief. Anonymously written pieces that are found to not be adequately justified will not be published. Published articles of this nature will be authored by “Agora Staff.”
- The Agora will not identify any spoken sources without asking for consent prior, in accordance with standard journalistic ethics, except in the circumstances outlined in the extraordinary events clause above.

## **Interviewing and Transcribing**

- As an organization whose publishing is mainly through opinion articles, the Agora takes the misrepresentation of spoken or written rhetoric, purposeful or not, very seriously.
- In transcribing oral interviews or other dialogue of such nature, the Agora will exclude utterances like “um” and “well” for clarity and conciseness.
- The Agora will edit for grammar if needed, and will indicate edits in brackets. For example, if a source states, “There isn’t any instances of fraud,” editors will change it to “There [aren’t] any instances of fraud.”
- In cases where exact wording is necessary, the Agora will publish the quote with “[sic]”.
- The Agora will indicate breaks in quotes using an ellipsis. Breaks may also be expressed by a mid-quotation attribution.
  - For example, if Jordan Belfort told us, “There aren’t any instances of fraud. At least none that I know of. We’re just talented marketers,” the Agora permits the following formats: a) “There aren’t any instances of fraud,” Jordan Belfort said. “We’re just talented marketers.” b) “There aren’t any instances of fraud ... We’re just talented marketers,” Jordan Belfort said.
- All interview source material will be explained. If an interview was in the form of an email, the Agora will preface a reference by stating that it was an email interview. This goes for phone interviews, written statements, forms submissions, instant messaging interviews, and text interviews.
- The Agora does not permit interview subjects to revise their interviews after the fact.
- The Agora does not pay for interviews or photos pertaining to interview subjects. In published articles, the Agora will use a) photos from which the Agora is granted written permission by the original photographer, b) Creative Commons licensed images under attribution 3.0 standards, or c) photos of interview subjects that will be taken by Agora staff.

- In the case of spoken interviews in person and/or over the phone, the Agora will provide a general topic idea but will not provide questions in advance.
  - In the case of written interviews such as email interviews, instant messaging interviews, and written statements, the Agora will provide a list of questions.
- In cases where potential interviewees are unresponsive to interview requests, the Agora may note that “[Subject] did not respond to a request for a statement/interview/comment.”

## **Journalistic Conflicts of Interest**

- The Agora will generally publish opinion articles by anyone, provided they satisfy our writing standards (quality, tone, research, insight), interview standards, confidentiality standards, hate speech standards, and polemic standards. This category however, pertains mainly to news reporting.
  - The identity of all op-ed authors will be described in the biography, including their affiliation with the subject material if applicable.
  - Provided that articles satisfy the Agora’s anonymity standards, the Agora still requires that an aspect of an unnamed op-ed author’s relationship to the subject material be published either in a note at the end of the article or within the article text.
- Members of the Agora’s staff may not hold a position in student government or other on-campus political bodies such as the graduate student council simultaneously with their Agora staff position.
- The Agora does not publish news articles about on-campus topics by staff members who are affiliated with the subject matter or components of the subject matter.
  - Staff writers are not permitted to author news articles regarding on-campus organizations of which they are also a part.
  - In contentious cases, the Editorial Board will convene to assess if the article satisfies the Agora’s standards for bias. The Agora requires at least one degree of separation to eliminate bias. For example, a staff writer who knows someone within a student organization will be permitted to report on news regarding that organization.
  - If an article passes publication qualifications, conflicts of interest and potential for bias will be noted at the bottom of every article alongside the author’s biography.
- The Agora does not explicitly prohibit the publication of informative or investigative news articles by staff members who have outwardly expressed an opinion on the subject matter on social media or any public apparatus. However, writers are advised that their credibility in writing these articles is hindered once they publicly express partiality in their process.
  - In these cases, the Editorial Board will conduct a thorough review of the reporting in question given that the credibility of the Agora as an impartial and unbiased organization is at stake.
  - In some cases, another staff member may be teamed up with the original author with a conflict of interest to ensure accurate and faithful representation.

- Agora staff writers are advised against interviewing their own friends or family in news reporting. The Editor-in-Chief reserves the right to reassign writers to certain interviewees, or assign another author onto the same news article.

### **Staff Editorials**

- The Agora does not take positions as an organization, unless in the event of a staff editorial.
- The Agora has never published a staff editorial and is especially indisposed about doing so, given the nature of our forum-format opinionated publishing.
- Nevertheless, the Agora reserves the right to publish editorials written by the Editorial Board following rigorous and critical collective discussion among the staff regarding the pertinence of the subject material, as well as the significance of taking a stand on an issue as a body.

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I, \_\_\_\_\_ (Print Name) understand these rules and regulations and agree to adhere to them accordingly. I understand that violation of these rules may result in disciplinary action, and I understand that I may be terminated after adjudication for failure to adhere to them.

X \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_