



Policies & Procedures

Editorial Guidelines on

[Sourcing](#)

[Use of Anonymous Sources](#)

[Extremism](#)

[Reporting on Suicide](#)

[Disturbing or Graphic Content](#)

[Blurring of Video and Photos](#)

[Corrections and Retractions](#)

[Breach of Journalistic Standards](#)

All RFA journalists must conduct themselves professionally and ethically, and promote the highest standards of journalism in accordance with RFA's Code of Journalistic Ethics and the following guidelines:

Sourcing

- RFA's Code of Journalistic Ethics states that, whenever possible, RFA journalists must seek and obtain more than one source for a story.
- Where there is a question as to the veracity of a source, the story will be held until such time as it can be verified. This may lead to stories with only one source being placed on indefinite hold.
- Where there is a question as to the possible risk of danger to the freedom, safety or well-being of either the source or the subject of an interview or story, the interview or story will be held until such time as the source's or subject's freedom, safety, and well-being are not at undue risk. This may lead to interviews or stories being placed on indefinite hold.
- All RFA journalists must ask detailed follow-up questions in order to verify sources' claims and ascertain the credibility of sources.

- RFA publishes citizen reports only after RFA journalists have double-checked the facts. Citizen content must be clearly identified as such in the caption of the story and in the text, whether it is in audio, video, or text format. We do not allow the publication of content that was emailed to us anonymously unless we can contact and evaluate the source or independently corroborate the information provided.
- Yearly program evaluations conducted by RFA's Research, Training & Evaluation Department will include questions and discussion about the use of sources and establishing their veracity. Additional as-needed training may be scheduled with the approval of RFA's Executive Editor on a case-by-case basis.
- RFA senior editorial management will review these guidelines on sourcing and citizen reporting at least yearly.

Use of Anonymous Sources

1. RFA only uses anonymous sources when the information the sources provide is not available from an on-the-record source or otherwise publicly available and is critical to a report.
2. When an RFA journalist wants to use an anonymous source, the source must be vetted by a senior editor, deputy service chief, service chief or senior editorial management before broadcast or publication. (That is to say, the journalist must disclose on a confidential basis to the editor who the source is and explain why the source is trustworthy and knowledgeable about the information they are providing). Those involved in the vetting process must keep the source's identity confidential.
3. Wherever possible, RFA should seek at least two sources for a report, particularly if the sources are anonymous. In exceptional circumstances, a single anonymous source may be used at the discretion of the Managing Editor, Southeast Asia or Managing Editor, East Asia (as applicable), or the Executive Editor, if the source is considered authoritative.
4. Unless the context of the story makes it obvious, RFA should explain why a source is being granted anonymity. This should be a persuasive reason. For example, the source may fear for his/her safety or losing his/her job if the identity is disclosed; or a government official may not be authorized to speak to media.
5. Describe the source as accurately as possible without revealing the identity. For example, if it's a government official, try to describe which government department the source works for and where. If it's a regular citizen, try to describe him/her by occupation, age and gender, or by other details that may help explain why the source is informed about the subject of the story. These details must be agreed upon between the journalist and the source before publication.
6. Avoid the use of pseudonyms or false names. If use of such a name is important for the narrative of a story, make clear that a false name is being used and explain why (as described in point 4).
7. In most cases, the information provided by an anonymous source should be factual, not an expression of opinion. (For example, we might quote an anonymous villager speaking about how a new factory has polluted his neighborhood, but we shouldn't quote him as claiming the factory is run by an evil man). This is to prevent a person hiding behind anonymity to slander someone else.

8. As per RFA editorial guidelines, we do not allow the publication of content that was emailed to us anonymously or otherwise shared online unless we can contact and evaluate the source or independently corroborate the information provided. We should be very cautious in citing a news report that is based on anonymous sources. Only do so if RFA is unable to confirm the news through its own reporting, and if the media outlet is a reputable one and the report has major news value.

Extremism

- RFA's Code of Journalistic Ethics states that RFA journalists must not incite listeners to violence or encourage acts of rebellion or emigration.
- RFA does not give an open platform to terrorists or extremists. If they make news in our region, we report on it. RFA journalists must consult with the Managing Editor, SE Asia or Managing Editor, East Asia (as applicable), or the Executive Editor, in advance of broadcasting or publishing, if the broadcast or publication could place RFA at risk of being used as a platform for such a purpose.
- RFA reports shall include full and detailed context and balance to both the story and the interview.
- Language Service Directors shall carefully monitor RFA call-in shows, and call-in hosts must promptly cut off callers who advocate violence or terrorism.

Reporting on Suicide

Reporting on suicide by non-public figures does not typically align with RFA's mission to bring its audiences domestic, uncensored news. However, if circumstances necessitate coverage of suicide, RFA reporting will adhere to the following guidelines.

Examples of this content include, but are not limited to:

When covering suicide, RFA will not:

- Sensationalize headlines or place prominently on websites, apps or social media.
- Include photos or videos of the location or method of death, grieving family, friends, memorials or funerals.
- Describe recent suicides as an "epidemic" or in other strong terms.
- Describe a suicide as inexplicable, or reporting that death by suicide was preceded by a single event, such as bad grades, recent job loss or divorce.
- Interview police or first responders about the causes of suicide.
- Refer to contents of suicide notes.
- Refer to suicide attempts as "successful," "unsuccessful," or "failed".

When possible, RFA reporting will:

- Report on suicide as a public health issue.
- Offer hope: Include up-to-date local and national resources where audiences can find treatment, information and advice that encourages help-seeking.
- Seek advice from suicide prevention experts.
- Use stories to inform audience about suicide risk factors and warning signs.

Acknowledge that suicide is complex and usually stems from multiple causes, including mental illness and substance abuse. Emphasize these disorders are treatable.

For more information on media guidelines when reporting on suicide: <http://reportingonsuicide.org/>

Disturbing or Graphic Content

RFA's mission is to report all the domestic, uncensored news that impacts its communities, including tragic incidents involving disaster, death, and other sensitive topics. Likewise, RFA journalists have a responsibility to report these stories in a careful manner with due respect for the subjects, their families, and audiences who may be adversely affected by imagery or audio depicting disturbing events.

Examples of this content include, but are not limited to:

- Violence perpetrated against people or animals
- Terrorist activities
- Imagery from natural disasters
- Accidents resulting in severe injury or death
- Imagery of bodies and injuries
- Suicide (see RFA's Guidelines for Reporting Suicide for more details)

There will be occasions when the nature of a report necessitates the inclusion of graphic imagery and audio, so a set of rules barring all use of this content would not be prudent. However, the decision making process for using sensitive material will always involve language service management and will include RFA senior editorial leadership, as needed.

When weighing the inclusion of potentially disturbing imagery or audio in news reports, journalists and editors should consider the following:

- Stories of tragedy and grief can often be told in a compelling and informative manner without the use of graphic media. If the use of disturbing content is considered essential to the story by editorial managers, only the minimum amount necessary should be used.
- Sensational audio and imagery can potentially distract from the rest of the story, replacing narrative interest with lurid curiosity.
- Publication of graphic or disturbing content is not justified solely by competitors using the same materials. There must be a newsworthy reason to do so.
- The publication of audio or video depicting injury and death can have a harmful impact on victims and their families. The utmost scrutiny should be used to determine if captured moments of injury or death are essential to the newsworthiness of a story. Use of these

materials can only be authorized by members of editorial management after careful deliberation with reporters and other relevant staff.

- RFA shall never use its platform to amplify propaganda or terror. Videos or messages created by extremists groups should not be posted or broadcast by RFA. RFA stories should not link to other locations (websites, social media, etc.) with extremist content.

If the decision is made to include graphic or disturbing content in an RFA report, the following measures must be considered:

- A visual warning must precede graphic content included in RFA videos. A vocalized warning must precede disturbing audio content on RFA radio and podcast programs. A text warning should also be embedded with media on RFA websites and apps. A text warning should appear in video descriptions, tweets, Facebook posts, etc. on social media.
- Thumbnails for videos and main images for articles on RFA websites and social media pages should not include disturbing imagery.
- Video and audio program titles should not highlight the sensational nature of disturbing content.
- Disturbing or graphic portions of videos and images should always be blurred and audio bleeped unless doing so compromises the integrity of the report.

Staff and editors should also note that third-party platforms, including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have separate policies and community standards regarding sensitive, graphic and disturbing content. Violation of a platform's community standards can result in severe penalties or suspension of RFA accounts. While third-party platform policies should not factor into how RFA covers a story, those policies should inform whether or not a story is published on that platform.

For more information, please refer to these resources:

YouTube Community Guidelines

<https://www.youtube.com/yt/about/policies/#community-guidelines>

Facebook Community Standards (Graphic Content)

https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/objectionable_content

Twitter Rules and Policies (Sensitive Media)

<https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/media-policy>

SPJ Code of Ethics

<https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

Blurring of Video and Photos

RFA is committed to full and transparent reporting of news and information. The same applies to its publication of photos, video and audio. However, there are instances where it is necessary to conceal the identity of a person or persons who appear in RFA content for their safety or well-being.

Before concealing the identity of person, an RFA journalist and editor should evaluate whether anonymity is necessary. Legitimate grounds for concealing a person's identity include:

- 1) fear of harm, punishment, or persecution if they are identified;
- 2) being subject to duress or captivity or being forced to appear in a photo or video against their will;
- 3) being a victim of a sexual assault or bullying;
- 4) being a minor whose parents have not granted permission for them to appear.

If in any doubt about whether to conceal a person's identity, an RFA journalist should consult with their supervising editor before publication. Each case is unique and open to interpretation. The most sensitive cases should be referred to RFA senior editorial management for a final decision.

Once an editorial decision is made to conceal a person's identity, an RFA journalist should find the least obtrusive way to do so, without getting in the way of the facts of the story.

Photographing or videoing a person or group from behind or at a discreet angle or in deep shadow is preferable to blurring. If blurring is needed, it should be minimized to the extent possible without revealing the person's identity. An explanation of why a person's identity is being concealed must be included in a caption or narration.

For audio, if a person has a legitimate fear of being identified by their voice, it may be necessary to use effects to distort it. However, this should be considered a last resort. It is preferable to paraphrase the person's comments or use a voiceover instead.

Once published, no image or footage should be retracted or changed without consultation with RFA senior editorial management. If a person is appearing in public, their desire not to appear in a news report is not in itself a valid reason for concealing their identity, even if they protest about it.

The RFA Policy on Disturbing or Graphic Content mandates the use blurring or bleeping to shield a viewer from graphic content of a violent or explicit nature. Such footage should be preceded by an on-screen or on-air warning to the viewer or listener. The use of blurring should not compromise the integrity of the story and should be minimized.

Corrections and Retractions

The RFA Code of Journalistic Ethics specifies that material errors published by RFA must be promptly acknowledged and corrected via the same communication medium in which the error was disseminated.

For broadcast: Serious mistakes, such as significant factual errors, require an immediate on-air correction. If that is not possible, an error aired in an RFA broadcast can be addressed in a brief announcement in a subsequent broadcast, explaining the error.

Online text: A correction to a story posted on the RFA website should be accompanied by editor's notes to explain the action that has been taken. A note above the main body of the story text should indicate that the story has been updated and at what time (for example, "UPDATED on Dec. 2, 2021, at 4:00 EST"). A note at the end should describe what has been corrected (for example: "This story has been updated to correct the name and age of the arrested man, John Smith, 25.") Errors in social media posts should also be corrected and a link provided to the updated story or post.

Online audio and video: Where an online audio or video report that requires correction, the incorrect version should be taken offline and a corrected version posted in its place, with an editor's note explaining the action taken.

Retractions

Wherever possible, RFA avoids retracting stories that it has published and which have therefore already entered the public record. A story should only be retracted if it violates RFA's Code of Journalistic Ethics and its shortcomings cannot be addressed by corrections and clarifications. No story should be retracted without the approval senior editorial management, including the Executive Editor. Should a story or post be retracted, RFA will publish an acknowledgment and explain the reasons for the retraction.

Breach of Journalistic Standards

- When an RFA report appears to constitute a material violation of the standards or RFA's Code of Journalistic Ethics, the Language Service Director must inform the Managing Editor, SE Asia or the Managing Editor, East Asia, or the Executive Editor. RFA senior editorial management will promptly conduct an internal investigation which will include an independent translation of the story in question, an interview of the editorial staff involved, and a meeting with the respective Language Service Director and Editorial senior management.
- If the investigation confirms that the story was in violation of RFA's Code of Journalistic Ethics, the Executive Editor will notify RFA's President, who may in turn inform the RFA Board of Directors.
- Any breach of RFA's Code of Journalistic Ethics and editorial guidelines may result in disciplinary action up to and including termination of employment.