Hetq's Editorial Policy

Investigative Journalists NGO and Hetq newspaper

This document is based on the principles of the **Code of Ethics** (the Code) of the Investigative Journalists NGO and Hetq newspaper, adopted on 6 December 2002.

Adopted by the General Assembly of the Investigative Journalists NGO on 02.02.2026

FOUNDATIONS

1. Mission and core values

The mission of the Investigative Journalists NGO / Hetq is to develop investigative journalism in Armenia and to strengthen freedom of expression and democratic principles.
The main purpose of the media outlet is to uncover the truth and inform the public. Freedom of expression is the highest value for Hetq, and it must be defended at all costs. At the same time, freedom of expression entails responsibility, which requires us to be fair, objective and honest.
Every Hetq journalist, by accepting this policy, undertakes to respect the principles set out below without exception.

2. Content verification, accuracy and corrections

- Publish only reliable and verified information.
- Clearly separate facts from commentary in publications; it must always be clear to the reader where the fact ends and the analysis/opinion begins.
- Do not distort facts. Correct any errors found as quickly, clearly and completely as possible.
- Procedure for correcting errors in published materials: the correction is made directly in the article, and a note headed “Correction” is added at the bottom, explaining to the reader what was corrected and what the original error was.
- Investigative materials undergo a three-stage review: assessment of the initial hypothesis and sources at an editorial meeting; review of the material by the editorial board; and review of the material for legal risks, together with fact-checking.
- The verification process for Hetq articles is based on Hetq’s 2023 Fact-Checking Guidelines.

3. Working with sources and the use of anonymous sources

- Whenever possible, always cite the source of information.
- Investigative journalism cannot exist without confidential sources: if a promise has been made not to reveal a source, that promise is kept unconditionally.
- Rule for using anonymous sources: anonymity is permitted only if the source requests it, the information is of public importance, there is no other way to obtain it, and the information can be confirmed through open or reproducible methods (documents, a second source, etc.).
- Do not gather information by illegal or dishonest means.

4. Verifying documents and leaks

- Give priority to primary documents: if the original document is available, do not settle for a third party’s retelling.
- Never rely solely on a fact published by another media outlet without independent verification.
- For complex datasets (financial, registry data), seek outside expert opinion when available.

- Where possible, state in the publication (or link to an explanation of) how the documents were obtained, at least to the extent that this does not endanger the source.

5. Digital security and source protection

- Establish at least one encrypted communication channel (for example, Signal or PGP-encrypted email) through which sources can transmit documents/information without endangering their identity.

- Do not keep sensitive data discovered during an investigation but not used for publication longer than necessary, and ensure that it is accessible only to the team directly involved.

- Never upload sensitive or unpublished documents/data to public AI tools (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, etc.), since their confidentiality guarantees have not been established.

6. Open-source investigation standards

- Try to substantiate every finding through multiple independent, open or reproducible methods, so that other journalists/researchers can verify the result on their own.

- When publishing photos and video, clearly state the source/authorship and accurately describe what is actually depicted; where necessary (to protect a vulnerable person), blur faces/identifying elements.

- When using AI tools for geolocation, date verification or large-scale data analysis, always fully verify the output before publication; AI-generated output is never in itself considered evidence.

7. Fairness, objectivity and the right of reply

- Before accusing anyone of an unlawful act or omission, hear their side and give them an opportunity to respond.

- Uphold the principle of the presumption of innocence.

- Practical procedure: before publishing an investigation containing an accusation, it is ensured that the subject/organization has been given a real opportunity to respond, through a written request and with a reasonable deadline (for example, at least 3–5 working days, depending on the urgency of the publication), and that the response (or the refusal to respond / non-response) is clearly reflected in the publication, rather than with the generic phrase “declined to comment”. In addition, for doubtful/contentious facts, at least two independent confirmations are preferable. [Please confirm the actual deadline set.]

Basis: ProPublica, Reuters — propublica.org/code-of-ethics, thomsonreuters.com/en/about-us/trust-principles

8. Working with vulnerable people and children

- Respect a person’s right to privacy, reputation, honor and dignity.

- Before interviewing, photographing or filming minors, obtain written consent from both the child and the parent/guardian; take special care when dealing with people who are psychologically traumatized or in a vulnerable state (use the “Parent or Legal Representative Consent” form developed by the editorial office).

- Reveal the identity of a minor or of a person involved in a crime only with a clear editorial justification.

- When preparing materials about vulnerable groups (displaced persons, victims of violence, persons with disabilities), consider not only the public value of the story but also the possible risks that publication may pose to their safety and dignity.

9. Managing harm and sensitive content

- When publishing materials containing descriptions/images of violence, death or self-harm, assess whether this is editorially justified, and provide appropriate context, warnings and blurring.

- When publishing materials about suicide, avoid detailed descriptions of the method, following international safe-reporting standards.

10. Copyright

- Respect copyright.

- Do not plagiarize.

11. Diversity and inclusion

- Strive to include the diverse experiences and perspectives of society, avoid stereotyping, and refrain from expressing one's own biases.

- In the choice of topics and subjects, ensure balanced representation of women and men, as well as of different social groups, especially when the topic allows for it.

12. Editorial independence

- Do not accept offers to write commissioned materials.

- Do not yield to political and financial influence and pressure.

- Do not be a member of any political party, do not become involved in politics, and do not hold public office.

- Avoid secondary employment if it calls into question the journalist's independence and objectivity.

- Avoid overly close ties with officials; personal and professional conduct must not inspire distrust or suspicion toward the profession and the media outlet.

- Do not accept gifts; decline free trips or other services that could call independence and impartiality into question. If a gift cannot be avoided, accept it and donate it to orphanages, nursing homes or similar institutions.

- Never serve any person, group or political orientation.

13. Separation of editorial and commercial activities

- No advertiser, sponsor, subscriber, donor or partner organization has the right to influence the publication, non-publication or content of any specific material, and this must be stipulated in every service agreement.

- The editorial team and the business/sales team operate separately; negotiations on commercial contracts may not include editorial guarantees.

- Sponsored or paid content is clearly and visibly labeled as such.

14. Use of artificial intelligence

- Any element created with artificial intelligence tools (image, text summary, voice, video editing) must be labeled in the publication.

- AI tools may help speed up work (data collection, summarization, visualization, geolocation support), but any fact or analysis they produce is considered an unverified draft, not a finished result, until fully verified by a human.

- Do not use AI to create misleading or false media (deepfake-type images/audio/video) that could be perceived as a real photo or recording.

- Do not process sensitive/unpublished documents and data in public AI tools (see Section 5).

- Every material created with the involvement of AI goes through the same fact-checking procedure as material produced entirely by humans.

15. International and cross-border investigations

- In network/cross-border investigations, respect the publication dates (embargoes) and data-sharing rules agreed with co-authors.

- Treat mutual verification with co-authors (peer review) as an additional verification mechanism, not a substitute; Hetq's own fact-checking is mandatory regardless of partners' verification.

- In co-authored publications, clearly state which participant contributed what; each participant is responsible for the accuracy of their own country's/topic's section.

16. Legal and physical safety

- Every investigative journalist is informed of the legal regulations in Armenia concerning the protection of journalistic sources and publication, and of Hetq's legal protection policy.

- In the event of threats, harassment or legal pressure, the journalist documents the incident (date, details, possible witnesses) and immediately informs the editorial office / the organization's management, keeping that documentation separate from their main work devices, based on Hetq's physical safety procedures.

- In the event of arrest or interrogation, the journalist knows their basic rights and the minimum course of action (noting the time, place and officials involved), and makes use of the legal assistance provided by the editorial office.

17. Social media

- After publication, materials are adapted and distributed through the official social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, X, LinkedIn, YouTube), in accordance with Hetq's social media policy. Any material published on social media platforms is subject to the same verification and accuracy principles as material published on the website.

- When managing their own social media pages, Hetq journalists are guided by Hetq's social media code of conduct, which is considered an integral part of this Policy.

18. Applicability

This editorial policy is binding on every journalist, editor and engaged external contributor of Hetq newspaper. New employees sign this policy upon starting work, as was previously the practice with the Code.

Appendix. Full text of the original Code (6 December 2002)

Investigative Journalists NGO and Hetq newspaper
(adopted on 6 December 2002)

The mission of the Investigative Journalists organization is to uncover the truth and inform the public.

Freedom of expression is the highest value, and it must be defended at all costs.

Freedom of expression also entails responsibility, which requires us to be fair, objective and honest.

We, the journalists of the Investigative Journalists organization and Hetq newspaper, by accepting these rules, undertake to respect the following principles under all circumstances:

- Publish only reliable and verified information.
- Separate information from commentary. In publications, clearly distinguish the presentation of facts from commentary.
- Do not distort facts. Correct published errors as quickly as possible.
- Do not gather information by illegal or dishonest means.
- Before accusing anyone of an unlawful act or omission, hear their side and give them an opportunity to respond.
- Uphold the principle of the presumption of innocence.
- In all possible cases, cite the source of information. Bearing in mind that investigative journalism cannot exist without confidential sources, if there has been an agreement not to reveal the source of information, the promise must be kept.
- Respect copyright.
- Do not write commissioned materials.
- Do not accept gifts; decline free trips or other services that could call our independence and impartiality into question and endanger public trust in Hetq newspaper. If a gift cannot be avoided, accept it and donate it to orphanages, nursing homes or similar institutions.
- Respect a person's right to privacy, reputation, honor and dignity.
- Do not plagiarize.
- Do not yield to political and financial influence and pressure.
- Do not be a member of any political party, do not become involved in politics, and do not hold public office.
- Avoid secondary employment if it calls into question the journalist's independence and objectivity.
- Avoid overly close ties with officials. Our personal and professional conduct must not inspire distrust or suspicion toward the profession and the newspaper.

Every journalist of Hetq newspaper must follow the above principles in the course of their professional activities.