

Practice of the Latvian Media Ethics Board

2019-2024



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Foreword

Five years of work of the association “Latvian Media Ethics Council’s” (LMEC) Ethics Board allow us to make a certain assessment and summary of our experience. This is offered and facilitated by the publication of the decisions of the Ethics Board compiled by Ilona Skuja and Āris Dreimanis. It presents 70 opinions of the Ethics Board (2019-2024).

The Media Ethics Council's quinquennium is not a simple continuation of journalism and communication ethics. The rise of communication technologies has made the increasing power of media influence evident. This is evidenced by the civic activities sparked by traditional media, but especially social media, in the world and in Latvia as part of the global and European media commons. The media are no longer just providers of accurate information, they are no longer just neutral mediators of broad communication between events and audiences, but often the initiators of spontaneous political and social ideas and movements, which are differently valued and difficult to control. Their ethical assessment, which goes beyond the individual journalist's individual ethics, therefore requires regulation and self-regulation by existing ethics committees or councils for journalists, print and electronic media, as well as by the Latvian Media Ethics Council as a media self-regulation institute.

The nine members of the association’s Media Ethics Board, whose membership is regularly updated each spring, mainly examine complaints submitted to them in monthly meetings, in line with the provisions of the Media Code of Ethics. However, it is not easy to equate abstract principles of fairness, justice, accountability and others to individual cases. A prolonged debate for several hours on the best solution to a case does not take place formally. The individual nuances and context of each case are taken into account. This discourages a formalistic bureaucratic approach and allows a judgment to be made about the trends in media ethics and their regulation in Latvia.

Media ethics is influenced by a number of factors. The most important of these relate to the reality of digital technologies and the widespread availability of information, as well as to real, unprecedented social (the Covid-19 crisis) and military situations, tragically exemplified by the Russian-led war in Ukraine in 2022 and the Gaza conflict in 2023. The new trends in media ethics point, firstly, to a sharpening of the dilemma of freedom of expression and moral responsibility, secondly, to a much greater sensitivity to disinformation and deception in the media and, thirdly, to a greater demand for the protection of privacy.

Individual complaints usually turn into a much broader assessment of the media's moral ecology. The Ethics Board refrains as far as possible from a sanctioning and punitive function, focusing instead on recommendations on how to portray the case more fully in the future, avoiding self-serving and self-serving interests in attracting audiences. The Board's decisions are aimed at shaping the moral ecosystem, taste and culture of the media by pointing out the habits of hate speech, disrespect, sensationalisation, decontextualisation and other practices that do not foster trust in the media.

Each meeting of the Media Ethics Board is an open space for discussion with the aim of finding the most rational, fair, reasonable and promising solution. Some grey areas and new dilemmas in

the Latvian media environment have been identified. How to avoid turning regulation and criticism into censorship? Is censorship only about state control and regulation? Is pluralism possible, can it be preserved without moral relativism, when there is no longer a consensus of values and agreement is impossible due to the diversity of opinions. Focused and democratic debate usually leads to some rational clarity, a shared moral conviction and perspective. Only in a few cases have opinions been divided and the autonomous views of both sides been preserved.

We live in a time of changing media identities. Every complaint indicates the presence of an unregulated relationship that needs to be normatively supported or eliminated in order to have less hurt and resentment and more reasonableness, benevolence and usefulness in social life.

Dr. phil. Skaidrīte Lasmane, Member of the LMEC's Ethics Board

Aims and objectives of the Association Latvian Media Ethics Council

The Latvian Media Ethics Council (hereinafter also - the Association or LMEC) is a non-governmental organisation founded in 2018 that promotes the development of an ethical media environment and media self-regulation. The 52 members and three associate members of the Association represent different forms and types of media, media associations and organisations. Without becoming members, another 25 companies and organizations have committed to complying with the Association's Code of Ethics. Complaints about compliance with the Association's Code of Ethics in the media are examined by the Association's Ethics Board, which includes nine elected members. The work of the Association is managed by the Association's Board, represented by Board member Ilona Skuja. Information about the association can be found at www.lmepadome.lv.

LMEC protects freedom of expression and the public's right to a safe and reliable information space.

The core values of the Association are:

- freedom of expression;
- diversity of information and opinions;
- editorial independence;
- media credibility;
- autonomy;
- rights of journalists;
- integrity (impartiality);
- human rights, in particular the rights of children and minors;
- equality and non-discrimination;
- audience education;
- trust between media and audiences.

The content of the media and the quality of the information it provides have a close link to critical thinking, which is an important skill in the information age, when people's daily lives are saturated with information of all kinds - on television, in the press, on the radio, on media websites and on social media. Media ethics work is ensured through self-regulatory mechanisms: the LMEC ensures that media organisations and companies adhere to the principles of the jointly developed Code of Ethics.

The media environment, like any other industry, is not immune to mistakes. LMEC helps to see and analyse them. LMEC is committed to maintaining quality journalism and media activity in Latvia. LMEC aims not only to investigate complaints and provide opinions, but also to educate media professionals and the public. The LMEC is active in order to make it easier for any content creator to analyse their work, to look critically at the content they produce and its ethical aspects. Ethical issues are not straightforward, online media bring many changes in the media environment and in the relationship with the audience, so LMEC follows the latest trends, educates in media literacy and promotes critical thinking skills among the public.

In the digital age, when the younger generation gets much of its information from social networks rather than traditional media, and the media consumption habits of the older generation are changing, the gap between media and their users is widening, which is why we need to take a broader view of media ethics. At the same time, in times of pandemics, war and various crises, the media have already proven to be indispensable and capable of fulfilling a unique function: providing and explaining important information, mobilising the public.

The Association's Code of Media Ethics

The Code of Ethics developed by the LMEC is based on principles such as integrity, respect, diversity of information, separation of facts and opinions, separation of editorial content and advertising, etc. The role of the Ethics Board is to define and interpret the Code of Ethics, which defines the basic principles of professional ethics, and to monitor compliance with the Code of Ethics.

The basic principles of the medium, as listed in the Code of Ethics:

- **integrity** (no false, distorted or misleading information, exaggeration, stereotyping or attempts to influence the audience, deliberately or covertly);
- **diversity** (diversity of opinion)
- **discrimination and incitement to hatred;**
- **a distinction between facts and opinions;**
- **the distinction between editorial content and advertising;**
- **objectivity** (obtaining and processing as much and as varied information as possible);
- **fact-checking;**
- **authentication of visual and textual material;**
- **critical attitude towards the source of information;**
- **respect;**
- **treating vulnerable people with caution and respect;**
- **caution when working with minors;**
- **confidentiality** (respect for the privacy of the source when obtaining sensitive information, or the media balancing the public interest against the potential harm to the individual);
- **respect for copyright;**
- **disclosure of conflicts of interest;**
- **transparency.**

The Society's Code of Ethics is available in English here:

https://site-775587.mozfiles.com/files/775587/Ethics_code_pdf.pdf

Opinions delivered by the Ethics Board in the period 2019 to July 2024

Self-regulation of the media industry is a key function of the Association. One of the tasks of the Association is to act as a mediator, arbitrator or ombudsman in situations where disagreements arise between audience representatives and the media as to whether a media outlet's handling of a particular publication, story or broadcast was ethical and consistent with the principles enshrined in the Association's Code of Ethics.

Opinion process

Paragraph 5 of the Code of Ethics provides for the right of victims to lodge a complaint with the Ethics Board of the Association. The handling of complaints is governed by the Statutes of the Association and the Code of Ethics. The Ethics Board, which is composed of nine representatives elected by the members and serves without remuneration, examines the complaints received, hearing the views of both parties - the complainant and the medium - and gives an opinion on whether there has been a breach of the Code of Ethics. Occasionally, in the case of more serious misconduct and offence, the media outlet is obliged to apologise. A decision that there has been a breach of the Code of Ethics is taken if at least six of the nine members of the Ethics Board find that there has been a breach. Although most decisions of the Ethics Board are taken unanimously, there are situations where the members of the Ethics Board vote differently from the majority.

The opinions of the Ethics Board are public and available on the Association's website <https://www.LMECadome.lv/etikaspadome/etikas-padomes-atzinumi>.

Opinion or comment

The opinions of the Ethics Board are prepared when a complaint is lodged with the Association by a victim - an individual, an organisation, a company. The status of a victim is open to interpretation and its limits are not strict. In the past practice of the Ethics Board, the opinions have been mostly prepared in situations when the Ethics Board has been approached by a person mentioned or shown in the media material or his/her representative. For example, the offended individual, a relative of the offended person who has since died, various legal entities - a

company, a state organisation, a non-governmental organisation, a manufacturer of a product mentioned in the media material, an industry association representing it, an embassy of the country mentioned in the material, a state institution, a representative of the offended ethnic group, etc. Between May 2019 and July 2024, the Ethics Board has issued 70 opinions.

The Ethics Board also often considers complaints from people who are not directly offended by a story or publication, but whose reasoning clearly points to possible ethical violations in the material produced by the media outlet. The Ethics Board sees the benefit of examining such complaints, as during the investigation, by presenting different perspectives, the members of the Ethics Board gain a more complete picture of the issues in the media environment, a mediated dialogue between the media audience and the media is created, new trends are identified, and existing problems are better understood. When reviewing such complaints, the Ethics Board provides its **commentary, its assessment of the situation**, and presents it to the complainant, the media and, in many cases, the wider public. In this way, the Ethics Board seeks to raise awareness of the role, rights and application of ethical principles of the media in different situations. Between May 2019 and July 2024, the Ethics Board has reviewed more than 100 such submissions and provided assessments.

Grading of findings - infringement and nature of the infringement

Between May 2019 and July 2024, the Association's Ethics Board issued 70 opinions. In 18 opinions, the Ethics Board found that the media had violated the Code of Ethics.

In not all situations where a media publication or story has deviated from the Code of Ethics, the opinions of the Ethics Board have formally established a breach of the Code of Ethics. In the ethical sphere, the totality of the circumstances, the context of the events, the motivation for the action are all relevant, which is why the decisions of the Ethics Board are made in context, in discussion, taking into account the proportionality of the opinion and its educative and change-inducing effect. Thus, there are also situations where a publication or story has deviated from the Code of Ethics, but the Ethics Board decides that it would be disproportionate to find that the media has breached the Code of Ethics. In seven such "borderline opinions", the members of the Ethics Board voted that the media outlet had not breached the Code of Ethics, but found that the material or conduct of the outlet showed signs of a breach of the Code of Ethics. Such decisions are based on an assessment of the overall context and circumstances of the publication, the significance of the alleged violation (e.g. whether it is central to the story or publication or whether it is considered a minor detail), the motivation of the media outlet, the uniqueness of the situation, the circumstances in which the material was produced, etc.

Opinions function

Although the Ethics Board's opinion most often cannot be entirely satisfactory for both parties, as it either upholds or rejects the complaint of misconduct, it can provide significant moral satisfaction for all parties. The very process of dealing with a complaint, hearing the parties, having the opportunity to hear the other side's point of view and to make your own heard, and having the opportunity to see the Ethics Board's view of the situation, is a sign of respect and an opportunity to see what happened in a new light, from a different perspective.

The opinions of the Ethics Board also have an important educational function. The principles of the Code of Ethics are fixed, but the societal and media environment is constantly changing: different values come to the fore from time to time, current affairs change, the way the media work changes, the media are confronted with unprecedented topics and situations, changes in the way media are used. The explanations in the Opinions therefore help to develop an understanding of how the principles of the Code of Ethics, the core values of society and the media can be reconciled and applied in new circumstances.

In cases of misconduct, the Ethics Board can oblige the media outlet to admit its mistake and apologise, but this is not always possible, as only a fraction of the complaints and opinions received have been about members of the LMEC. In two cases, the Ethics Board has ordered the member to correct the error, retract the information and publish an apology. Often the media, most often internet portals, react to complaints received by the LWML before they are examined by the Ethics Board by clarifying and correcting errors.

Violations of the principles of the Code of Ethics identified in the opinions

18 opinions found breaches of various principles of the Code of Ethics.

Principle enshrined in the Code of Ethics	Number of infringements detected	Opinion No.
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Integrity (Art. 4.1)	9	3/2020, 11/2020, 15/2020, 7/2021, 5/2022, 1/2023, 9/2023, 2/2024, 7/2024
Diversity (Art.. 4.2)	3	15/2021, 16/2021, 7/2024
Distinction between facts and opinions (Art. 4.4)	4	6/2020, 16/2021, 9/2023, 7/2024
Respect (Art. 4.7)	4	4/2020, 10/2020, 11/2020, 2/2024
Fact-checking (Art. 4.6.1)	4	20/2020, 16/2021, 7/2022, 7/2024
Obtaining and using information (Art. 4.6)	3	15/2021, 5/2022, 1/2023
Discrimination and prohibition of incitement to hatred (Art. 4.3)	2	7/2020, 2/2024
Disclosure of conflicts of interest (Art. 4.10)	1	3/2019

In situations where a breach of the Code of Ethics has been found, the **principle of integrity, as enshrined in Article 4.1** of the Code of Ethics, has most often been breached. In the Association's Code of Ethics, breaches of the Code of Ethics involve false, distorted or misleading information, exaggeration, stereotyping and attempts to influence the audience.

Although in the information-abundant environment of the internet it is difficult for the media to attract people's interest, and it is common practice to create sensational headlines and use images that stir up emotions, the LWEPP calls on the media to look critically at whether the content they produce is objective, to check the facts and the veracity of the information. Making mistakes can lead the audience to question not only the integrity of the journalist, but also the objectivity and truthfulness of all published content.

A journalist's integrity and sense of responsibility are particularly important in situations where a side is being attacked - whether in reporting, editorials, opinion pieces and other forms of expression that allow for subjective judgement and criticism. In these materials, the form of expression may be more pointed, the journalist may inject emotion. Although authors enjoy a higher degree of freedom of expression in such material, this right is not absolute. The principles of media ethics also apply to this format. For example, the right to express an opinion cannot justify hate speech, defamation, deception or humiliation. Attempts to influence the audience through stereotyping, dehumanisation, calls for discrimination, unfounded

generalisations and prejudices may be indicative of a lack of integrity on the part of the author/commentator. The oft-cited recognition that opinion can be anything and that opinion, being subjective, is not subject to the test of truth is also not absolute. Opinions, especially when they are offensive to people, must also be based on truthful information. In order to avoid misleading the audience, they should be subject to both the principles of the distinction between opinion and fact, and to the principle of verification of information, in order to make it clear where fact ends and opinion begins. These situations also highlight the professional responsibility of the journalist and the responsibility of the editorial staff. The validity and reasonableness of a journalist's opinion is held to a higher standard than that of an outsider. Also in situations where the publication is prepared as an opinion piece or a commentary by the author, the editorial board must, before publishing the opinion piece, assess the compliance of the publication with professional standards and the norms of freedom of expression, inviting the author to ensure that the material complies with professional standards in case of deficiencies or non-compliance with the regulatory framework, as the case may be.

Opinions often conclude that the media have violated **Article 4.6 of the Code of Ethics, *Obtaining and Using Information***, and its **4.6.1, *Verification of Facts***. The situations addressed in the opinions of the Ethics Board are varied, but confirm the importance of these principles. Information obtained in a cursory manner and not verified may lead to inaccurate or erroneous content. Although in the case of a factual error the media is obliged to publish a correction as soon as possible, a retraction in the case of multiple errors and an apology where appropriate, it has been found that this is not always the case.

The next violation most frequently found in the opinions of the Ethics Board relates to **Article 4.4 of the Code of Ethics on the distinction between fact and opinion, which** is important to prevent the audience from perceiving journalists' opinions or interpretations as facts. The breaches were found both in opinion pieces, by presenting unsubstantiated opinions as facts and thereby misleading the reader, and in news-format pieces, by including unverified opinions among facts and presenting them as facts without indicating that they were opinions and who was expressing them.

Equally frequent in the opinions of the Ethics Board are **breaches of Article 4.7 of the Code of Ethics - the principle of respect**. The principle of dignity implies a considerate attitude towards everyone, but in particular towards vulnerable persons. Violations of the principle of dignity have been found in media material containing hate speech, in situations where the criticised or accused party has not been given the opportunity to express his or her views, in the way the editorial staff reacts or fails to react to information or complaints from the offended party, and in the way the media includes information about victims of crime in its material.

On several occasions, the opinions of the Ethics Board have found a breach of **Article 4.2 *Diversity of the Code of Ethics***. This point also refers to impartiality and the public's right to

receive a wide range of information and opinions from different sources. The media, including journalists, should identify and consider different points of view. The findings of the Ethics Board show that this point is more often violated in material that is critical of a person or product and based on one-sided information.

Discrimination and incitement to hatred (Article 4.3) were found in two cases. It is important to be aware that freedom of expression and the right to publicly express opinions are not absolute - hate speech is not allowed in any type of material. While anyone, including a journalist, can lose control of his or her emotions, it is the responsibility of the media outlet's editorial staff to ensure that discrimination and incitement to hatred are not expressed in the media, including in users' comments.

Breaches of the principle of integrity (Art. 4.1)

[Ethics Board Opinion No 3/2020.](#)

In this situation, the failure to verify the facts led to a breach of the principle of integrity: by failing to verify the facts, the media disseminated misleading information. In this case, the media outlet retracted the false information. The Ethics Board pointed out that in cases of retraction of false news, it is advisable to accompany the retraction with an apology, regardless of whether an apology was requested. The Ethics Board considers that a journalist's actions should cultivate norms of decency, including by apologising in the event of a factual error.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 11/2020.](#)

Lack of integrity is also linked to arbitrary and unfounded generalisations. A media outlet criticising a company had used statements made by an industry authority in an earlier interview with another media outlet and had given the misleading impression that the statements referred to the company being criticised.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 15/2020.](#)

The Ethics Board concluded that the video was not produced with integrity. By manipulating parts of the interview and transforming them into a form that reinforces the message desired by the producers of the story, the purpose of the video material was not to provide objective and comprehensive information on the issues discussed in the video, but to confirm the assumptions of the producers of the video about the negative impact of the construction of the base station on health, which, at the same time, was not properly supported by the facts.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 7/2021.](#)

The principles of integrity must be observed very carefully, particularly in investigative journalism on sensitive issues. A journalist must critically assess his or her ability to carry out scientific research without specialised knowledge on issues where the scientific research is complex and must be carried out under the supervision of qualified specialists. It is also necessary to be consistent in the collection and analysis of data and to observe basic ethical principles in the generalisation of conclusions, including avoiding the publication of misleading information and exaggerations. Failure to conduct these studies with due diligence is more detrimental to the overall quality of journalism, undermines trust in professional media and scientists, than it is to the public good.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 5/2022.](#)

The Ethics Board concluded that the media's initial action in spreading the news of the allegedly forged vaccination certificate constituted sensationalisation of unverified news and was unduly hasty, given the sensitive context of what had happened. It was contrary to the principles of integrity and the acquisition and use of information enshrined in the Association's Code of Ethics. In cases where the matter under discussion involves the death of a person, the media should rely only on verified facts and particularly cautious and in-depth research of the sources of information. Inadequate research into the matter may bring dishonour to the memory of the deceased person and may leave him or her unable to defend himself or herself. The Ethics Board stressed that at the time of publication, no circumstances had been identified which would justify immediate publication, for example to prevent potential immediate harm or danger to public health, rather than awaiting the outcome of the investigation or merely reporting that the police were investigating the circumstances of the case.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 1/2023.](#)

Integrity principles must be observed with particular care in investigative journalism, when reporting on possible breaches of the law and when associating companies and individuals with information that negatively affects their reputation. At the same time, views on how the media should report on issues of public interest, conduct research, report to the public or refrain from critical reporting differ sharply even among media professionals. It follows from this opinion of the Ethics Board that the media should take care to ensure that it is not possible to draw critical conclusions that are unfavourable to an organisation from a collection of several true facts - in this case, that there is a causal link between the murdered lawyer's submission to the law enforcement authorities, with his belief that the person with whom he had a conflict had laundered money at the then indirectly owned Latvijas Pasts banka, and the fact that the bank was subsequently fined EUR 2 million. Most members of the Ethics Board considered that such a perception would be misleading and stressed that, when preparing stories on such sensitive issues as money laundering, the wording should be precise so as not to leave room for interpretation and attribute to a person complicity in money laundering, which is a criminal offence. This was a case where there was

disagreement among the members of the Ethics Board as to whether the Code of Ethics had been breached. Several members of the Ethics Board added their individual opinions to the decision, which differed from the decision of the Ethics Board and justified the compliance of the story with the Code of Ethics.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 9/2023.](#)

This opinion of the Ethics Board is issued in respect of a publication that mixes the author's opinion and feelings with an informative presentation and attributes unethical behaviour to an organisation without any factual basis. As a result, the publication does not comply with the basic principles of journalism: facts are not clearly distinguished from opinions and information is presented in a misleading manner in breach of the principle of integrity.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 2/2024.](#)

In assessing the opinion piece containing hate speech, the Ethics Board concluded that the lack of integrity was demonstrated by attempts to influence the audience through stereotyping, dehumanisation, calls for discrimination, unfounded generalisations and prejudices. The opinion also assessed the editorial work of the medium. In situations where the author's position is understandable, but the publication is not well thought out and qualitatively prepared, expresses the author's national intolerance, rage, anger, hatred, violates the principles that the media must respect, including when publishing opinions, the role of the editorial board is particularly important. Before publishing an opinion piece, the editorial board must assess the publication's compliance with professional standards and the norms of freedom of expression, calling on the journalist to ensure that the piece complies with professional standards in the event of deficiencies or non-compliance with the regulatory framework, as appropriate.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 7/2024.](#)

The Ethics Board concluded that, while subjective judgement and criticism may be permissible in an opinion piece and the form of expression may be harsher, the principles of media ethics also apply to this format. Such material, especially when it is offensive to people, must also be based on factual information. In order to avoid misleading the audience, they should be subject both to the principles of the distinction between opinion and fact and to the principles of fact-checking, in order to make it clear where fact ends and opinion begins. In this case, the Ethics Board concluded that the publication was based on unverified and factually unsupported claims; it demonstrated an attempt to use false, distorted and misleading information to deliberately influence the audience. The Ethics Board considered that the aim of the publication was not to ascertain the truth but to influence the public by creating a misleading and untrue impression of the complainant's professional activities and her non-compliance with the law.

Breaches of the principle of diversity (Art. 4.2)

[Ethics Board Opinion No 15/2021.](#)

The media's role is to provide the audience with the most comprehensive assessment of the circumstances, listening to all sides and objectively reflecting the views of all parties, thus providing the most objective content possible. Even if all the views of the parties involved in the situation are not fully reflected in the material the media outlet produces, the media outlet's role is to proactively seek the views of all parties.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 16/2021.](#)

The principle of diversity requires the media to ensure the public's right to receive a variety of information and opinions from different sources. The Ethics Board concluded that the article, although called a study, was superficial, including the use of terms such as "common knowledge", which were not supported by evidence. The title of the article generalises its subject, but the article deals with issues relating to the company in question, so that the views of other parties should be heard. The article is driven by an emotional and biased interest without being properly substantiated.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 7/2024.](#)

This opinion concerns a publication which, in the view of the Ethics Board, was deliberately designed to defame a person by making unverified and factually unsupported allegations, using false, distorted and misleading information. The publication violated several principles of the Code of Ethics, including the principle of plurality, as the accusations in the publication were based on only one opinion - that of the journalist. The principle of diversity provides that "the media shall ensure the right of the public to receive a variety of information and opinions from different sources. The media and persons associated with them shall take into account different points of view, even if they appear personally unacceptable."

Breaches of the principle of respect (Art. 4.7)

[Ethics Board Opinion No 4/2020.](#)

When producing content, the media outlet must communicate with all stakeholders (persons mentioned in the content) and provide a reasoned response as to why an opinion or comment will not be accepted and published. Failure to respond in such cases is contrary to the

principle enshrined in Article 4.7 of the Code of Ethics that the media recognises and respects the unique value of each person and affirms this in communication. The media must pay particular attention to the interactions with the parties covered in media material. If a story or publication involves several parties, this creates the likelihood that the parties involved will also wish to express their own, possibly different, views and, even if the media would not publish the views expressed, the commentator should, where possible, obtain the media's assessment of the reasons for not reporting the views or comments. The journalist's personal opinion cannot influence the exclusion of certain opinions from the published content.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 10/2020.](#)

A media outlet was found to have breached the principle of respect by seeking compensation for the removal of photographs republished without permission from a person's Facebook profile.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 11/2020.](#)

The principles of respect also apply to *ad hominem* insults, which are not in line with a basic level of morality and media culture and are therefore unacceptable and unacceptable in journalistic practice.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 2/2024.](#)

The principle of respect is a universal ethical principle, and its observance is the basis for ethical behaviour, but failure to respect this principle in media work often leads to violations of other media ethical principles. In this case, the publication expresses the author's national intolerance, rage, anger, hatred and violates several principles of the Code of Ethics, including the principle of dignity, as the lack of dignity is the basis for the stereotyping, dehumanisation, calls for discrimination and unfounded generalisations expressed in the article.

Breaches of the principle of the distinction between facts and opinions (Art. 4.4)

[Ethics Board Opinion No 6/2020.](#)

The Ethics Board concludes that while every person, including journalists, has the right to freely express his or her opinion, the media has a duty to clearly distinguish between the opinions of journalists and their analytical journalism. The title of the article "NRA investigates who and why is preparing a ban on livestock farming and meat eating in Latvia"

suggests that the article is investigative in nature, but its content shows that the media material in question is an opinion piece by the author, which is substantiated and the conclusions interpreted with reference to various sources supporting the author's opinion.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 16/2021.](#)

The Ethics Board concludes that, although the article is entitled "research", it does not seek the opinion of the criticized party, the claims made in the article are without proper substantiation, it does not include sources, documents or other evidence to support the claims made in the article, and it uses terms such as "common knowledge". Rather, this material should be considered an opinion piece and should clearly distinguish between opinion and fact or state that it has no basis in fact.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 9/2023.](#)

This opinion of the Ethics Board is issued in respect of a publication which presents the author's opinions and feelings as fact, attributing unethical conduct to an organisation without any factual basis. By conflating opinion with other facts, the information has been presented in a misleading manner, also in breach of the principle of integrity.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 7/2024.](#)

In this opinion on a publication which, in the view of the Ethics Board, was purposely designed as a defamatory piece about a person, the failure to distinguish fact from opinion was one of several breaches of the principles of the Code of Ethics. In an attempt to influence the audience, the author's non-factual and misleading statements and assumptions are presented as facts in the text that follows.

Breaches of the principle of obtaining and using information (Art. 4.6)

[Ethics Board Opinion No 15/2021.](#)

The obligation of the media to produce as objective a media report as possible, listening to the views of those involved in the issue, even if such views seem personally unacceptable. The Ethics Board draws attention to the fact that the conclusions of the article are drawn only from the point of view of other persons, and not from the point of view of the author himself.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 5/2022.](#)

In this situation, the broadcasting and publication of unverified information violates the principle of obtaining and using information. Even in situations where the facts change, the media must ensure that information that is not true is retracted, for example by supplementing the article or by linking it to a more recent publication from which it is clear that the information previously disseminated was false.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 1/2023.](#)

In this opinion, following a complaint by LPB Bank, then indirectly co-owned by Mikhail Ullman, about a story in the investigative journalism genre, the Ethics Board expressed its assessment whether an internet portal specialising in reporting on events in the criminal world should be used as a source of information. In this case, the members of the Ethics Board were divided. The majority considered that the principle of sourcing and use of information had been violated and that top-level analytical journalism media should be particularly cautious when referring to such a source; while it is not always possible for journalists to verify the veracity of the information used, they should make this clear to their audience and explain their decision to use such information anyway, including disclaimers as to whether the facts have been verified. However, some members of the Ethics Board considered that there was no violation and that the media had acted correctly in using, among several sources of information, a crime portal, and in doing so with precise reference to the source used and the information it contained. The allegation that the authors of the story did not critically evaluate the source used and did not attempt to verify the statements published therein may be considered as an untested hypothesis, particularly in a situation where the information published by the source used is consistent with information available on other channels.

Breaches of the principle of verification of facts (Article 4.6.1)

[Ethics Board Opinion No 20/2020.](#)

The media have a duty to report truthful information and the dissemination of false, distorted or misleading information is unacceptable and must be prevented. The Ethics Board concluded that the media outlet had not carried out sufficient verification of the factual accuracy of the information disseminated in the programme, thereby possibly damaging the reputation of another media outlet. The Ethics Board took the view that in the event of such a factual error, the media outlet was obliged to publish a correction as soon as possible.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 16/2021.](#)

The article was found to have breached fact-checking - by criticising a particular company, the journalist had not made any effort to contact it. The article also did not include sources, documents or other evidence to support the claims made.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 7/2022.](#)

Ethical breaches can also be caused by journalists being sloppy and uncritical of the source, relying too much on the stories and emotions of the parties involved. In this television story, citizens expressed information to journalists that gave the impression that a county councillor had acted in bad faith and had a conflict of interest in real estate transactions. The producers of the story had not checked the facts, even though such fact-checking would have been easy for the media to do, as the information to be checked was publicly available. The result was a biased story which gave the misleading impression that the municipality had not been honest and had committed a conflict of interest. Given that correcting information once it has been broadcast and published does not have the same effect as broadcasting the story on television and on the internet, the Ethics Board ordered the media outlet to apologise in the same format as the false information was disseminated.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 7/2024.](#)

Although subjective judgement, criticism and sharper language may be allowed in opinion pieces, the principles of media ethics apply to this format as well. Such material, especially when it is offensive to people, must also be based on factual information and therefore the principle of fact-checking - "the media shall avoid publishing unverified information" - also applies to the facts and statements used in it. The Ethics Board concluded that the author and the media outlet had not verified the facts referred to in the article and that they were not true. The publication was also found to violate other principles of the Code of Ethics; it showed an attempt to use false, distorted and misleading information to deliberately influence the audience. The Ethics Board concluded that the publication was not intended to establish the truth, but to influence the audience by creating a misleading and untrue impression of the complainant's professional activities and her non-compliance with the law.

Breaches of the principle of disclosure of conflicts of interest (Art. 4.10)

[Ethics Board Opinion No 3/2019.](#)

Although the facts presented in the article are true, there is a conflict of interest issue. Conflicts of interest include both real and merely perceived or perceived conflicts of interest. The objective of the media is to ensure public confidence in the information it publishes in the event that there may be concerns about the impartiality of a particular piece of media.

Violation of the principle of non-discrimination and non-incitement to hatred (Art. 4.3)

[Ethics Board Opinion No 7/2020.](#)

Everyone, including journalists, has the right to freedom of expression, but this excludes the possibility of expressing discriminatory, exaggerated or divisive views. The work of all media, including when dealing with controversial issues and listening to different points of view, must always respect the unique value of every human being and must not deliberately promote intolerance.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 2/2024.](#)

The opinion was issued on an opinion piece or commentary by the author in response to the Russian President's threats against Latvia and criticising the use of minority issues as a political weapon. The Ethics Board concluded that the author's position is understandable, but the publication is not well thought out and qualitatively prepared, it expresses the author's national intolerance, rage, anger, hatred, and violates the principles that the media should follow, including when publishing opinions. Although the publication is prepared as an opinion piece, the editorial board must, before publication, assess the compliance of the publication with professional standards and the norms of freedom of expression, calling on the journalist to ensure that the material complies with professional standards in the event of deficiencies or non-compliance with the legal framework.

Opinions where there are indications of a breach of the Code of Ethics but no finding of a breach

Number of opinions	Opinion No.
7	2/2019, 8/2021, 9/2021, 4/2022, 10/2022, 4/2023, 8/2023

[Ethics Board Opinion No 2/2019.](#)

In the context of the established elements of violation of the principle of obtaining and using information (Article 4.6), the Ethics Board concluded that the story was not critical of the views expressed by the source. The journalist must be able to assess the impartiality of the views expressed by the parties, in particular in the light of the source's possible interests and conflicts of interest.

Commenting on the compliance of the story with the principle of fairness (Article 4.1), the Ethics Board stated in its opinion that the content of the story showed signs of stereotyping and in the particular case it was not necessary to include information about the person's profession in the depiction of a domestic dispute. When creating the content, journalists should assess whether the facts mentioned, such as the person's profession, position, age, gender or anything else, are relevant information in the depiction of the event in question.

Finding that the story violated the principle of diversity (Article 4.2), the Ethics Board noted that the media is not obliged to publish the full answers of all sources, but it must ensure that the public receives a variety of information; in this situation, the written answer was not published to the extent necessary to provide the audience with more information about the views of all parties and the motivations for their actions.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 8/2021.](#)

Commenting on the compliance of the publication with the principles of diversity (Art. 4.2) and separation of facts and opinions (Art. 4.4), the Ethics Board noted that the article should have either named the author of the opinion or provided a diversity of opinions in the article by highlighting the different existing opinions on the treatment method in question; thus, the principle of diversity of opinions was violated here. Media material relating to medical treatment must be regarded as particularly sensitive, allowing for the possible impact of such information on public health.

In such cases, the media should either choose to explore the issue analytically, ensuring a diversity of views by drawing on a variety of related opinions from different sources, or, in the case of an opinion piece, provide full information about the author of the opinion piece. The role of the media is to promote the public's right to receive a diversity of information and views from a variety of sources, but where a journalist's opinion is published, it should be clearly distinguished from the facts.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 9/2021.](#)

Violations of the principle of good faith may involve unjustified sensationalisation of the issue. This is often evident in content involving the reporting of sensitive or tragic events. In this situation, in the view of the Ethics Board, the media outlet should, as far as possible, consider the various possible scenarios of the event, so that the material prepared by the media outlet gives the public as objective an impression as possible of the various possible scenarios of the event. In the event that the media has developed only one possible scenario in the course of investigating a particular issue, the investigation of the issue should continue, where possible, by seeking to identify other versions of the event, which would contribute to

a full public understanding of the possible versions of what happened, thereby avoiding unjustified sensationalisation of one version of the event.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 4/2022.](#)

The principle of respect (Article 4.7) requires the media outlet, when receiving a request, to show respect in its interactions to the extent possible, which in the present situation would mean responding to the request even if the media outlet does not see the ethical or legal violations alleged in the request. Particular attention should be paid to cases where the media outlet's audience repeatedly asks for an assessment of the compliance of a particular piece of media material with legal or ethical requirements. In the view of the Ethics Board, the form in which requests are made should not be a formal criterion for the media outlet not to respond on the pretext that the request received does not comply with the procedure for making requests laid down in the legislation; the media outlet should respond to requests that clearly identify the applicant and are not anonymous.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 10/2022.](#)

The Ethics Board concludes that the publication reflects information provided by only one party to the conflict, but in a publication on an issue of public interest and controversial in the public sphere, such an approach does not ensure diversity of information, moreover, the publication does not take a critical approach to the source of information. However, looking at the overall coverage of the topic on the portal, the Ethics Board concludes that other publications on the topic also cover citizens' concerns, arguments and protests, thus ensuring the public's right to receive a variety of information and opinions from different sources.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 4/2023.](#)

In the view of the Ethics Board, the programme makers, in seeking information about the parents of the person who caused the accident, had understood that they were referring to the former, not the current, Chairperson of the Orphans' Court, but had made an inaccuracy in the text of the programme by not using the word "former" or "former". As a result, the story contains contradictory information and may give the impression that the current Chairperson of the Orphans' Court is the subject of the story. The Ethics Board also notes that the article published on the website, which retells the story, was corrected after a complaint was received by adding the word "former": "Viktor suspects that the parents of the Lexus driver from the Aluksne side also influenced the proceedings through their connections. The father is a former MP and the mother is a former chairwoman of the orphanage court." Looking at the details of the story, the Ethics Board sees inaccuracy as a violation of the Code of Ethics, but looking at the story as a whole, the inaccuracy does not seem to be significant enough to establish a gross violation of the Code of Ethics. However, the Ethics Board considers that, when reporting on a sensitive topic such as allegations of influence on a trial or investigation and when including references to specific persons, the authors of the story should be more

careful and precise in the future so as not to jeopardise the reputation and legitimate interests of third parties and persons not involved in the situation.

[Ethics Board Opinion No 8/2023.](#)

The Ethics Board concluded that the cover of the magazine, in the tradition of the yellow press genre, attempted to arouse interest in the publication, but that the use of the image and text on the cover was not sufficiently accurate and could therefore mislead the reader. In the view of the members of the Ethics Board, the cover of the magazine shows signs of a breach of the Code of Ethics, since the concentration of misleading information on the cover of the magazine leads to opposite conclusions to those drawn from the article on the inside pages of the magazine. The members of the Ethics Board recommend that the publisher should take greater care and responsibility in designing the cover of "Privātā Dzīve" in order to prevent possible misleading of the audience, harm to the persons featured in the publications and to maintain as good a reputation as possible for the yellow press genre.

Various aspects of the Ethics Board's opinions and comments

As mentioned, between May 2019 and July 2024, the Association's Ethics Board issued 70 opinions. In 18 opinions, the media outlet was found to have violated the Code of Ethics, in 7 cases the Code of Ethics was not violated, but there were signs of a violation in the media outlet's work.

What conclusions can be drawn from the 45 opinions in which the Ethics Board decided that there had been no breach of the Code of Ethics for the Media and that there were no indications of a possible breach? What conclusions can be drawn from the more than 100 comments made in situations where no opinion was prepared?

As mentioned above, the opinions are mostly given in situations where the injured party has contacted the Association. If the person is not considered a victim, in most cases no opinion is prepared; the Ethics Board examines the submission, the media's explanation, discusses the situation, and the Association's Board informs the submitter and the media by letter of the Ethics Board's view of the situation. Between May 2019 and July 2024, the Ethics Board has made approximately 100 such comments.

The fact that no opinion is prepared on a complaint does not mean that the media outlet may not have violated the Code of Ethics. A breach of the Code of Ethics may also have occurred in cases where no one has complained, where the complainant is not considered a victim, and where no specific person has been harmed by the media publication or story. However, it is not the function of the Ethics Board to monitor the work of the media on a day-to-day basis and to issue an opinion on all possible complaints, so in situations where the Ethics Board deals with complaints on which no opinion is prepared, the Ethics Board often explains in its comments the role and rights of the media, the application of ethical principles in different situations, and makes recommendations to the media in an attempt to raise awareness of media ethics and mediate dialogue between the media audience and the media.

Some examples.

- At the end of 2022, a number of media outlets published unverified and misleading information about the death of businessman Juris Savickis. A reader complained to the Association's Ethics Board about the media's work. The Ethics Board did not issue an opinion in this situation because the complaint was not made by Mr Savickis, who was directly offended by the publication, and it was not appropriate to issue an opinion: the media had retracted the erroneous news, had publicly apologised to Mr Savickis, the information about the error had been widely disseminated, and the Public Media Ombudsman had already issued a formal opinion on the situation, finding a breach of the Code of Ethics in the work of the public media portal.
- A similar situation occurred with the publication of the so-called "Pig Comic", dedicated to the anniversary of the Ukrainian war in 2024. In both of these situations, a

commentary by the Ethics Board was prepared and presented to the complainants, the media and the public.

If the person aggrieved had approached the Ethics Board in these situations, it is likely that these publications would have been assessed more formally and opinions would have been issued.

In conclusion, the opinions and comments of the Ethics Board do not provide a basis for drawing general conclusions on the compliance of media activities with the Code of Ethics. However, their content gives an idea of how different parties (media audience, media representatives, members of the Ethics Board) perceive and deal with issues related to the basic principles of media work and media ethics. In the following, we will look at issues that are recurrent and common in the opinions that did not find a breach of the Code of Ethics and in the comments/assessments of the Ethics Board.

The importance of correcting, clarifying, adding to errors

Complaints before the Ethics Board often concern inaccurate, erroneous, misunderstood or incomplete information. In some of these situations, the complainants have also addressed the media outlet, pointing out the alleged deficiency; in others, they have only addressed the Association. In seemingly justified cases, the Association brings the complaint to the attention of the media and asks for an explanation. Often, by the time the Ethics Board has considered the matter, the media outlet has clarified, corrected, supplemented the material - acted in accordance with the situation, and sometimes apologised. This is also the principle of *integrity* in the Code of Ethics, which states that the media should strive to provide truthful information, without exaggeration, stereotyping and avoiding any deliberate and covert attempts to influence the audience. If this is not achieved, the media outlet is obliged to react, correct or retract the information. Adding, clarifying and correcting information is an inevitable part of the media's work and shows that the media strives to respect ethical principles.

In most of these situations, where **the media outlet has made changes in response to the information received**, the Ethics Board positively evaluates the media outlet's actions, finds no violation, reminds the media outlet of the importance of ethical principles and makes recommendations for future compliance. Such situations are described in several opinions of the Ethics Board.

- Opinion [No 8/2020](#) concludes that the newspaper has retracted the information disseminated in the publication and apologised.
- Opinion [No 9/2020](#) concludes that the news agency has clarified the message.
- In its Opinion [No 13/2021](#), the Ethics Board concluded that, after the complaint had been lodged, the editorial board had deleted the comparison made by the author in the opinion piece, which had been unduly offensive to the dignity and honour of the

complainant, since her opinion had in fact been compared to that of another person on the vaccination certificate as a Nazi tool. In correcting the article, the Ethics Board considered that the media had acted in accordance with the values and principles enshrined in the Association's Code of Ethics. At the same time, the Ethics Board drew attention to the fact that in order to develop ethical media practices, it would be useful to apologise to the person offended in the article and to highlight the clarification in such a way that the media audience could perceive the clarification at least in the same way as the original message.

- Opinion [No 4/2023](#) concludes that the media outlet has clarified the news published on the portal following the inaccurate television story and its descriptive publication on the portal.
- Opinion [No 6/2023](#) concluded that the media outlet, after receiving a complaint about an article in a newspaper and on an internet portal, had clarified the publication on the portal by adding information that the person mentioned in the material refuted the allegations made by the third party, thus ensuring the person's so-called right of reply.
- Opinion [No 1/2024](#) deals with a complaint by an official about an inaccurate report on the radio. After receiving the complaint, the radio had clarified the online article and apologised to the offended person.
- Opinions [Nos 5/2024](#) and [8/2024](#) dealt with complaints about offensive and privacy-invasive comments on a website article. At the time of the complaint, the media had deleted the objectionable comments.

Similarly, the Ethics Board has commented on situations where **a third party has complained**.

- For example, in 2022, a complaint against the "jauns.lv" publication "Germany to allow sex change once a year from age 14" found that some of the information was untrue and different from the original German source. Following a request for clarification by the Board, the publishing house Rīgas vīļņi acknowledged that the publication was incomplete and misunderstood, and supplemented and clarified the publication. In its assessment of the situation, the Ethics Board notes that the publication initially showed signs of a violation of the Code of Ethics, but that the corrections to the publication and its title have remedied the deficiencies: the title is clearer after the clarification and the content of the publication is more in line with the original source. In assessing this situation, the Ethics Board stresses that the ethical principles of the media must be respected in all situations, but that the coverage of sensitive topics and the creation of headlines are issues to which the media must pay close attention.
- In its opinion on the publication of the "Pig Comic" on the portal "lsm.lv" in 2024, the Ethics Board took into account that the media outlet had deleted the publication and apologised.
- In another third-party application - regarding the publication of the portal "lsm.lv" - it is pointed out that the interview with the President of the Republic of Latvia Egils Levitas, which is retold in the article, is presented in a biased manner, the quote of the President

is distorted, distorting the idea, and as a result the article and the reference to the quote are used to incite interethnic hatred on the platform "Facebook". The Latvian Television, which was responsible for the article, replied that, in the opinion of the author of the article, the President's statement was correctly reproduced and in line with what he had said, but that in order to avoid any misunderstanding, the editorial board and the author of the article had clarified the publication. Having assessed the situation and listened to the interview, the Ethics Board agreed with the complaint that the quotation from the President's statement was initially inaccurately reproduced - the omitted words in this situation slightly changed the meaning of what was being said. The Board could not agree with Latvian Television that the original version of the article reproduced the President's words in the real version. In the view of the Ethics Board, the interview was grammatically sloppy. The Ethics Board explained that when a media outlet claims that what a person says is direct speech, it must ensure that the quotation is accurate and not an interpretation of what was said. This is particularly important in situations such as this one, where the statements of the country's highest officials on sensitive geopolitical situations and ethnic aspects are being reported.

The timeliness of the media's action and whether the clarification has gained the same visibility or audibility as the information originally disseminated, and whether the inaccurate information is still available in the archives of radio, television stories or articles in its original form - without clarification, addition or reference - may be a matter of debate. In cases where the inaccuracy is not minor, but rather a serious defamation, a significant error or a violation, the Ethics Board has insisted that the media outlet's clarification or apology appear in the same form as the information originally disseminated.

- In its Opinion No 3/2020, the Ethics Board recommends that in cases of retraction of false information, the retraction should also be accompanied by an apology, regardless of whether an apology was requested. The Ethics Board considers that the journalist's actions should promote standards of decency, including by apologising in the event of a factual error.
- Opinion No 7/2022 concluded that the broadcaster considered the infringement to be minor after the inaccurate and defamatory television story and its descriptive publication on the portal and was prepared to make changes only to the article published on the media portal. The Ethics Board considered that this action was insufficient and instructed the media outlet to retract the information that had also appeared on television.
- Opinion No 5/2022 concluded that the news programme had disseminated unverified, untrue news defamatory of the honour of the deceased A. Cimdaris, which had been widely disseminated by other media. Two months later, the programme included reports that "the information previously given has not been confirmed", including an apology to the deceased's family. The original message on the TV website was still not clarified. The Ethics Board considered that this action was incomplete and untimely, as when it is indicated that a deceased person may have committed a criminal offence, updating the information after almost two months does not outweigh the damage caused to the memory of the deceased and to the relatives of the victim. The Ethics Board considered

that if the facts of the situation change, the media outlet should ensure that information that is not factually correct is retracted, for example by supplementing the article or by linking it to a more recent publication which clearly shows that the information previously disseminated proved to be untrue. In the view of the Ethics Review Board, the media outlet's dissemination of the false information did not constitute a retraction of the original false information and the correction and apology were not disseminated at the same time and in the same form as the original dissemination and the media outlet was therefore ordered to retract the disseminated information.

Liability of news websites for user comments

The Ethics Board has examined complaints about the content of comments published on news websites and the validity of the deletion of comments.

Paragraph 4.3 of the Code of Ethics prohibits discrimination and incitement to hatred and obliges media outlets to ensure that published material and reader comments are free from hate speech, incitement to violence and other activities prohibited by law. If such non-compliance is found, the media outlet must remedy it as soon as possible, including through self-regulatory mechanisms.

In several cases, the Ethics Board has found that the violations had been remedied by the time the complaint was reviewed. The Ethics Board has reviewed complaints about incitements to violence, hate speech and violations of privacy in comments. The Ethics Board recommends that media outlets take care when moderating comments, and that the media outlet's response to inappropriate comments be swift, i.e. soon after they appear on the site, in order to mitigate potential harm. In situations where the media outlet is aware that the material published is sensitive or may provoke strong reactions, it should assess its ability to moderate comments; if this is not sufficient, consideration should be given to refusing to publish comments on the material in question.

Not all complaints about offensive and critical comments by readers have been substantiated by the Ethics Board - for example, in Opinion 1/2020, the Ethics Board stated that it did not see any comments that were hateful, incited violence or otherwise violated the law, and drew the complainant's attention to the fact that if he found any of the comments offensive, he had the right to complain to the media outlet concerned about the comment and ask for it to be removed. Similarly, the Ethics Board concluded in its review of a complaint by the Tukums Municipal Board in 2021 about comments in the digital version of the article in the newspaper "Nezkar Independent Tukums News" which, in the view of the Board, openly incited money, were indecent and offensive to personal dignity. The Ethics Board found that the comments attached to the complaint did not contain any indication that such information should not be published under the Law on the Press and Other Mass Media, Article 7 of which lists in detail the types of information that the media are prohibited from publishing. The Ethics Board asked the City Board, in case it detects a comment on the Internet that meets the definition of unpublishable

information, to contact the media outlet in question and inform it about the specific comment. Similarly, if a municipal official considers that a media outlet has violated his or her dignity and honour by its action or inaction, he or she has the right to apply to the courts or law enforcement bodies to protect his or her violated rights or legally protected interests. At the same time, the Ethics Board pointed out that public officials actively involved in politics, including City Council officials or even parliamentary candidates, are included in the circle of persons whose permissible limits of criticism are relatively wide.

When considering complaints from portal users about comments being deleted and banned, the Ethics Board stated that it is not the competence of the Ethics Board to review such situations and that it recognises the right of a media outlet to monitor the comments published on the websites it hosts and their compliance with the terms of use of those websites. They usually also explain the rules on commenting and the right of the medium to take care of the culture of discussion, to manage comments, including by preventing comments from being published. In the event of disagreement, the Ethics Board invites the commenters of rejected comments to read the commenting rules carefully and to assess their posts for compliance with these rules, such as the relevance of the post to the content of the article, the content of the statements, the form, etc. If, after this assessment, you are still convinced that a comment has been refused without good reason, you may contact the editors of the website concerned. They will usually have information on the posting history of registered users. It is also possible that a comment has been deleted by mistake.

Associating people with criminal or morally unacceptable offences

Mentioning a person in connection with alleged crimes, misconduct, unethical or controversial behaviour or fact undoubtedly has an impact on their reputation, whether the association is justified or unintentional. Although in many cases the actions of the media are justified by the public interest and the right to information, the persons mentioned in such publications often question and challenge the ethics and legality of the media's actions. The situations in which individuals may be associated with reprehensible conduct vary widely: they may be participants in an event, but their association with the event may also be coincidental; they may be mentioned in connection with criminal conduct, administrative offences, family or neighbourly conflicts or morally unacceptable conduct. Given the diversity of situations, there is also no single formula for the handling of complaints by the Ethics Board. It may take into account the importance of the event for society, the public's right to know the truth, the gravity of the offence and the damage to a person's reputation, the availability of information at the time the media material was produced, the obtaining and reporting of different points of view, the verification of facts, and the impartiality of journalists.

Incidental link to a controversial issue or offence

Several opinions were issued on complaints about a person's accidental involvement in a controversial offence, but none of them found a breach of the Code of Ethics.

- Opinion No 5/2020 deals with a complaint that an article on the portal "nra.lv", which informs that the police raided a municipal company, includes photographs from the scene of the incident, which show the names and positions of the company's employees, including the data of the complainant. The complainant considered that, given that the search of the company's premises was in no way related to his professional activity, such a photograph would suggest that he was involved in the activities referred to in the article. The Ethics Board concluded that the photographs accompanying the article illustrated the scene of the proceedings, but did not in any way directly implicate the complainant or others in the commission of the alleged offence, nor would they lead a neutral observer to believe that the photographs used to illustrate the article in question were intended to identify persons directly involved in the commission of the alleged offence.
- A similar situation is addressed in Opinion No 12/2020 of the Ethics Board. In connection with a search conducted by the State Revenue Service at a company and related objects, a journalist of the Latvian Television programme "Panorama" contacted the outsourced accountant of the company, who explained that she was the outsourced accountant of the company in question and had no additional information in this regard. However, the story replays the conversation, shows the complainant's name on the screen and informs that the complainant is the accountant of the company in the story, not the outsourced accountant, and reports that one of the suspects is the company's accountant. In the view of the Ethics Board, the journalist acted in accordance with the rules of his profession in gathering and presenting in a summarised manner the information obtained in the course of the investigation. At the same time, the Ethics Board notes that where the insight given to the audience into an alleged criminal offence may give a contradictory impression about the involvement of persons covered by the media in such an offence, the media must ensure that such persons are protected against possible unjustified damage to their reputation. The media must take care to ensure that the media audience, which does not have in-depth knowledge of the situation and its circumstances covered by the material, does not have an inaccurate impression of the involvement in the offence of the persons covered by the story. The media should provide a sufficiently clear and understandable explanation to the media audience of the role of the persons featured in the story.
- Opinion No 4/2023 of the Ethics Board dealt with a complaint by the head of a municipal orphanage court against a TV3 programme "Bez Tabu" about an accident trial. The story alleged that the head of the orphanage court had influenced the court or the investigation. Although the former head of the orphanage court was the subject of the

programme, the journalists had made an inaccuracy by not using the word "former" or "former" in the text. As a result, the story contained contradictory information and at one point could have given the impression that the story was about the current Chairperson of the Orphans' Court. The members of the Ethics Board considered that, although the story had caused the complainant unpleasant moments, it did not jeopardise her position and the misunderstanding was easily explained to the employer. Looking at the details of the story, the Ethics Board saw in the inaccuracy a violation of the Code of Ethics, but looking at the story as a whole, the inaccuracy did not appear to be significant enough to establish a flagrant violation of the Code of Ethics. However, the Ethics Board considered that, when reporting on such a sensitive subject as allegations of influence on a trial or investigation and when including references to specific persons, the authors of the story should be more careful and precise in the future in order not to jeopardise the reputation and legitimate interests of third parties and persons not involved in the situation. The Ethics Board instructed the media to be more careful in the handling of information when producing stories of a similar nature in order not to unduly jeopardise the reputation and legitimate interests of third parties and persons not involved in the story.

- Opinion No 6/2024 of the Ethics Board deals with a complaint from the municipality about a TV3 programme "Bez Tabu" story in which journalists try to get more information about a violation of international sanctions in a company in the Valmiera region. The complainant stated that the story gave the misleading impression that the council of Valmiera Regional Municipality might have information about or involvement in the incident, however, the Ethics Board concluded that the story depicted the process of obtaining information, including attempts to obtain information from various representatives of the Valmiera Regional Council, and did not give the impression that the Valmiera Regional Council was involved in the sanctions violation; the impression is rather of the extent to which council representatives are accessible and open to communication with the media on uncomfortable topics. Given that the journalist sought information from several representatives of the Valmiera Regional Council, the municipality gained more visibility in the story than other parties. The Ethics Board assessed it as an everyday occurrence that did not please the council and did not find the story in breach of the Code of Ethics, explaining that the reporting process can be complex; what we see in stories is often quite different from what was intended.

Persons involved in investigations and court proceedings

- Opinion No 5/2022 concluded that the TV3 news programme disseminated unverified and untrue information about the former head of the Central Election Commission, A. Cimdars, who had died of Covid-19, claiming that he had a forged vaccination certificate. The Ethics Board considered this to be sensationalisation of news that had not been sufficiently verified and which was unduly hasty given the sensitive context of what had happened. In cases where the matter under discussion is indirectly linked to the

death of a person, the media should rely only on verified facts and particularly cautious and in-depth research of the sources of information. Given that inadequate research into a matter may bring dishonour to the memory of the deceased, as well as the fact that such a person has no opportunity to defend himself, the media's action in publishing anecdotal information purporting to show criminal conduct by such a person was hasty, unjustified and contrary to the principles of integrity and the acquisition and use of information enshrined in the Code of Ethics. The Ethics Board stressed that at the time of publication of the information, there were no circumstances which would have warranted immediate publication, for example to prevent potential immediate harm or danger to public health, rather than awaiting the outcome of the investigation or merely reporting that the police were investigating the circumstances of the case. The Ethics Board considered that the media representatives also had reason to contact the family of Mr Cimdars in order to verify the anecdotal information in the media's possession. Although the family of Mr Cimdar could be critically assessed as a source in this case within the meaning of Article 4.6.3 of the Code of Ethics, in such a sensitive situation the media had to use all possible means to avoid unjustified prejudice to the deceased and his relatives.

- Opinion No 9/2021 deals with a complaint by the State Police that, in reporting on the tragic event in Tukums where two men suffered serious burns, the TV3 programme "Degpunktā" had biased the coverage of the event by presenting only one version of the event, despite the fact that the ongoing criminal proceedings were merely obtaining information that could confirm any of the versions of the investigation. The Ethics Board stressed that it was aware of the circumstances of the media in dealing with dynamically changing information, which can change and evolve as a result of both investigative and journalistic research. However, in the story in question, the journalist acted rashly in his coverage of the tragic events, developing only one possible version of the events, which led to an unjustified sensationalisation of the issue. In the view of the Ethics Board, the media should take care that the material produced gives the public as objective an impression as possible of the various possible scenarios of the event. In the event that the media outlet has developed only one possible scenario in the course of investigating a particular issue, the investigation of the issue should continue, where possible, by seeking to clarify other versions of the event, which would contribute to a full public understanding of the possible versions of what happened, thereby avoiding unjustified sensationalisation of one version of the event.
- Opinion No 1/2020 of the Ethics Board dealt with a complaint by the person referred to in the judgment of the Court regarding a publication on the portal "la.lv", which mentioned that person. The Ethics Board concluded that the facts presented in the article corresponded to the court judgment and that the name of the person (without surname), the make of the car (without registration number), the place where the conflict took place (without residential address), the profession (without workplace) mentioned in the publication were derived from the publicly available court judgment in which the name of the victim was published and that the media had not infringed the Code of Ethics. In the view of the Ethics Board, it was also relevant that the conflict covered by the article

took place in a public place and not in a private space, which may therefore be of fully justified public interest, including in the context of public order and safety.

- Opinion No 12/2021 of the Ethics Board deals with a complaint of a person regarding articles on the portal "tvnet.lv", which report on the criminal proceedings in which he is accused and the activities of the companies he represents. The person stated that the media had not asked for his opinion and that he did not agree with the accusatory remarks in the article. Having heard the media's arguments that the information in the material from the news agency "Leta" - the seriousness of the charges, the abstracts from the indictment, the size of the tax debts - demonstrated the importance of the information for the public, the Ethics Board considered that the material describing the proceedings clearly and unequivocally indicated that there was a dispute about the complainant's guilt of the charges against him and that the material did not breach the Code of Ethics. The Ethics Board also noted that, in the present case, the Ethics Board does not have, nor is it in a position to obtain, sufficient information to assess the evidence obtained in the course of the pre-trial investigation and the veracity of the information contained in the transcript of the indictment.
- In its Opinion No 6/2023, the Ethics Board examined a complaint by a former customs officer against a publication in the newspaper Latvijas Avīze, which quoted a person's testimony in court that the complainant had ordered her to take bribes. The complainant stated that this was untrue and defamatory, and that the media had not asked for and included his opinion. After receiving the complaint, the media outlet supplemented the publication and explained that the criminal case had been heard in open court and that none of the parties had any further questions or objections to what the person had testified about the former customs officer. Nor was there any collateral decision in the criminal case to prosecute the witness for knowingly giving false testimony. In the view of the Ethics Review Board, the editorial supplement to the publication was comprehensive - it indicated the circumstances in which the third party's statement quoted in the publication was made -, the editorial staff had responded to the complaint and supplemented the publication with both the complainant's opinion and other information.
- In its Opinion No 18/2020, the Ethics Board examined a complaint against the Latvian Television programme "Personīgā lieta" regarding a litigation dispute. Although the complainant considered that the programme disseminated false information and the court decision in the civil case supported his arguments, during the examination of the complaint the decision of the Prosecutor General's Office regarding the termination of the criminal proceedings concerning the facts about the complainant provided by the journalist was reversed and the criminal proceedings concerning the facts about the complainant and alleged fraudulent activities of a company provided by the journalist were merged with other criminal proceedings. The Ethics Board concluded that the situation in question involved a number of legal disputes, the legal details of which were still being fully clarified, including through criminal proceedings. When considering the ethical considerations of the work of the media and journalists, it should be borne in mind that the public seeks the assistance of the media, while the media, by helping to clarify the circumstances of a dispute between themselves, acts as a public watchdog. In

justifying the public's trust, the media has the right, in the resolution of an individual dispute, to simultaneously draw attention to a broader social issue and inform the public about it.

- In Opinions No 1/2023 and 2/2023 on complaints by a bank indirectly owned by a person accused of crimes about defamation of reputation in an analytical journalism story in "Nekā personīga", the Ethics Board ruled differently, and in both cases the members of the Ethics Board were not unanimous.
 - In its Opinion No 1/2023 on the episode of the TV3 programme "Nekā personīga", the majority of the Ethics Board found an infringement and stated that when disseminating information about the bank's possible involvement in money laundering, the information was not thoroughly checked and the source of information was not critically assessed - the journalists should have provided evidence for the version of the source of information presented in the programme. However, in interpreting the list of facts, the majority of the Ethics Board agreed with the Bank's argument that the facts were selected and twisted in such a way as to give any neutral viewer the false impression that there was a causal link between Mr Bunkus's submission and his belief that money laundering was taking place at the Bank and the fact that the Bank was subsequently fined EUR 2 million. Several members of the Ethics Board stressed that, when preparing stories on sensitive issues such as money laundering, the wording should be precise, leaving no room for interpretation and avoiding imputing to any person involvement in money laundering, which is a criminal offence. However, basing the Ethics Board's decision on the possible interpretations of third parties is not always consistent. For example, in its Opinion No 12/2020, the Ethics Board concluded that it could not assess the possible reactions of the audience, in particular the persons featured in the story, to the format and construction of the media material. However, in the case of the Bank's complaint, the views of the members of the Ethics Board itself differed. The members of the Ethics Board who disagreed with the infringement decision and considered that the programme makers had complied with the standards of professional ethics presented their views separately and these were annexed to the opinion.
 - Opinion No 2/2023 dealt with a further complaint from the bank about another episode of TV3's "Nekā personīga" programme. The Ethics Board found no violation in this complaint and concluded that the mention of the bank in the programme was neither self-serving nor excessive. The story was about the investigation into the murder of Martins Bunkai and, among the aspects of the case, it dealt with the conflict between Mikhail Uļmanis, accused of instigating the murder, and Martins Bunkai, who had informed the supervisory and law enforcement authorities about suspicions of money laundering in transactions involving, among others, companies linked to Uļmanis, with accounts in the former Latvijas pasta banka, which was still indirectly owned by Uļmanis when the programme was made. Thus, the very fact that one of the bank's biggest real beneficiaries is accused of instigating the murder and is in custody was one of the

factors shaping the bank's reputation. This risk had also been pointed out to the bank by its banking supervisor, the Financial and Capital Markets Board. The Ethics Board explained that, in accordance with the principle of independence of the media, it would be unreasonable to expect the programme makers to deliberately conceal this connection and to avoid reporting on what had been discovered during the investigation and related aspects (such as the seizure of Mr Ullmann's assets) as soon as they concerned the bank. However, the information provided by the bank and the separate quote in the programme clearly reflect the bank's position on the reputation management risks identified by the FCMC, ensuring a diversity of views in the programme on this aspect as well. The opinion of the Ethics Board also noted that the programme's background narrative could not be seen in isolation from its original audiovisual form. What is seen and heard on the screen is part of the programme, and the text must therefore be seen in that context; it may contain pauses, passages may be spoken in different voices, each passage of text on the screen may be accompanied by additional information indicating the source of the information, and so on. The member of the Ethics Board who disagreed with the decision did not state his individual views and did not add them to the decision.

The media as watchdog and protector

- Opinion No 7/2023 dealt with an investigative journalism article in the Latvian edition of Forbes magazine about the continued success of a State Revenue Service's IT systems maintainer in procuring services and its possible owners in an offshore firm that indirectly owns the company. Although the complainant alleged that the publication attributed criminal activities to it, the Ethics Board concluded that these allegations were not consistent with the article and that the media outlet's attempts to find out who owns the offshore firm, which indirectly owns the company, and to assess the activities of officials related to the owners of the company, as well as its criticism of the State Revenue Service's procurement process, were in the public interest and supported by facts and information sources in the article.
- In its Opinion No 14/2020, the Ethics Board examined a complaint about the TV3 programme "Nekā personīga" story "A group of alleged fraudsters sells invalid higher education diplomas in Latvia. The State Service for Quality of Education starts an inspection". The complaint stated that the journalists had deliberately, with malicious intent, disseminated false information, failed to seek the applicant's opinion on any of the issues, failed to verify documents and other publicly available information, discredited the State's official policy on non-formal education, unjustifiably used offensive, false terms and characterisations, violated the data protection rights of natural persons, caused both moral and material harm to the applicant. The Ethics Board found no breach of the principles enshrined in the Code of Ethics; in its view, the preparation of the material

complained of had, as far as possible, taken into account the views of the parties involved in the matter, including their right to anonymity, and freedom of the press also includes a certain degree of deviation to the point of exaggeration or even provocation.

- In a commentary, the Ethics Board, while reviewing complaints of a religious organisation about publications of the portal "tvnet.lv" about its activities, explained that the people interviewed for the publications expressed their personal experiences, conclusions and opinions about their experiences in the church and while already outside the church - these people have an indisputable right to express their opinions and choose how to describe their experiences - even if they are negative. The media also have the right to be critical of their chosen subject. In its Opinion No 5/2023, assessing the development of this topic in the Latvian Television programme "4. studija", the Ethics Board recommended that the media, when viewing and developing sensitive topics of public importance initiated by another media outlet, should make an effort to get closer to the truth, introduce more accuracy into the narrative about possible background events and delve deeper into the problems that have already been voiced. For example, in the television story seen, one could try to verify the extent to which the information about the "alleged paedophilia case" and the opinions expressed are true: "they solve any problems within their organisation without involving law enforcement - even if the offence is serious"; "within the organisation they hold justice committees to deal with specific issues, such as this paedophilia case".

Some of the complaints are about the depiction of family and neighbour conflicts, disputes over property, quality of services. Such conflicts are often complex, each side has arguments in favour of its point of view, and it is inevitable that the parties to the conflict may be perceived in a positive or negative light. In these situations, journalists have a duty to strive for fair coverage of the event and the parties, to maintain neutrality, to critically assess information and to listen to the different sides of the conflict.

In reviewing such complaints, the Ethics Board has most often found no violations (e.g. Opinions 9/2022, 4/2021, 3/2021, 18/2020, 4/2019, 1/2019), but sometimes deviations from the principles of the Code of Ethics have been found.

In several opinions, the Ethics Board has pointed out to the media the obligation to listen to the parties involved in the conflict and the material mentioned.

- Opinion No 15/2021 concluded that the media had prepared a critical piece about a person on the basis of information provided by various persons, but had not attempted to contact the person criticised, thus denying him the so-called right of reply.
- Opinion No 2/2019 concludes that, although the media is not obliged to publish the entire response of the person involved in the conflict, his or her written opinion was not included in the story - it was not published to such an extent that the audience would be able to receive more information about the person's opinion on the situation presented in the story and the motivation for his or her actions.

When the media constantly produces material that highlights various follies and personal conflicts, there is a tendency to heighten drama, to fall into sensationalism, to lose objectivity and a critical attitude towards sources of information.

- 2020. In 2020, following a number of complaints about such television programmes, the main essence of which, according to the complainants, was that the viewpoints of the parties involved had not been adequately reflected, the Ethics Board, in a letter to NEPLP and in a public statement, acknowledged that there was a lack of neutrality on the part of the programme maker, which is mostly manifested by an excessive focus on presenting the emotional point of view of the injured party, inadequate critical assessment of the veracity and relevance of the information to reality and incomplete presentation and inclusion of the other party's point of view in the story. This creates the potentially misleading impression that the other party to the story has always acted in bad faith, which may not be true. The Ethics Board points out that in order to avoid such problematic situations, journalists should pay more attention to proper communication with the parties involved, both during and after the production of the story. Greater attention should also be paid to the balance of views and proper coverage, so as not to give the misleading impression that a party is acting in bad faith. The medium was also recommended to improve its internal content screening processes to prevent poor quality and misleading content from going on air.

New topics on the media agenda - Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine

Pandemics and war were new events that quickly became part of the media's daily routine to describe, investigate and explain. The extraordinary and important nature of these events was such that the public took sharply opposing positions on vaccination issues, while the war provoked outrage, fear, hatred and made many people take a clear and condemnatory stance against Russia and various manifestations of Russianness and expect and demand such a stance from the media. Disinformation and conspiracy theories also flourished during the Covid-19 pandemic, but as the pandemic gave way to war, the sources of disinformation changed their content. Naturally, the attention paid to disinformation, the efforts to identify, name and combat it, and the media's attention to avoiding uncritical use of sources that might have a more permissive attitude towards Russia also increased. Here, too, there are extremes, for example, in seeing Kremlin narratives and influence in almost every media piece that contains criticism of Latvia and Latvians, the government, allies. These two major events have triggered changes in societal values - their prevalence and importance - and have also influenced views on what constitutes ethical behaviour in media work.

Although the complaints reviewed by the Ethics Board provide insight into only a few situations where there was a difference of opinion between the media and the media audience regarding Covid-19, Russia's war in Ukraine and the information war against the so-called Western

democracies, these situations provide insight into the application of the Code of Ethics in the media's reporting and the media audience's thinking about these events.

War in Ukraine

For most war-related complaints, the Ethics Board has made an assessment of the situation, or a comment rather than an opinion, because only rarely has a particular person been offended. Opinions were issued when dealing with complaints of incitement to hatred, as well as at the beginning of the war, when such complaints were rare and the Ethics Board had not yet become accustomed to the new situation.

- In 2024, when evaluating the publication of the "Pig Comic" on the website "LSM.lv", dedicated to the second anniversary of the war in Ukraine, the Ethics Board acknowledged that comics and cartoons as a genre traditionally have a higher tolerance level - comics are allowed to provoke and be satirical. However, in this case, as the artist and the "LSM.lv" editorial board admitted, the aim was not to provoke, so the Ethics Board concluded that the provocation and offence had been unintentional and inappropriate, and viewed it as a consequence of carelessness and insensitivity. The Ethics Board considered that, while the artist's creative freedom was not in dispute, the editorial board had a duty to take into account the times in which we live, the contexts in which the publication was used and the fact that a message on a sensitive subject such as the defenders of Ukraine dressed up in controversial images would be perceived incompletely or even contrary to what the author had intended. The Ethics Board explained that such cases serve as a reminder to the media that media rights exist in the context of media responsibility and expressed the hope that the debate generated by this event would be more beneficial than the harm caused by the publication.
- In 2024, the Ethics Board issued Opinion No.2/2024 on incitement to hatred on the portal "la.lv" with the article "Armands Puče: Currently 20% of all Latvian schoolchildren do not study in Latvian schools. Latvia is paying for it". The Ethics Board found that the publication was about topical issues that are painful for many Latvian citizens, including the author of the article. The media outlet explained that the sharp commentary was written in response to the aggressive rhetoric of the Russian President threatening the Republic of Latvia, and the journalist highlighted the fact that there is a certain segment of society that has been engaged in hate speech and chauvinism in Latvia for decades, is purposefully unwilling to accept the integration and education policy of the Republic of Latvia, ignores the national language and laws, and uses the issue of ethnic minorities as a political weapon. The Ethics Board concluded that the publication and the actions of the editorial board have a number of aspects that should be criticised. While the authors have the right to use vivid language and to provoke, there are limits beyond which the publication loses its journalistic quality and grossly offends some readers. In this case, the publication contains dehumanisation, calls for discrimination, generalisations, prejudices and disproportionate abuse. In situations

where the author's position is understandable, but the publication appears to be written in a strong emotional outburst, is not well thought out and well prepared, and violates the principles that the media must respect, including when publishing opinions, the role of the editors is particularly important. Before publishing an opinion piece, it should assess the publication's compliance with professional standards and freedom of expression norms, calling on the journalist to ensure that the piece complies with professional standards in the event of any shortcomings or non-compliance with the regulatory framework. In this case, in the view of the Ethics Board, the editorial board of the portal had failed to fulfil this obligation and had breached the provisions of the Code of Ethics.

- In 2024, when reviewing a complaint about the Latvian Television programme "Kultūršoks", the Ethics Board concluded in its commentary that the complaint had been filed on the basis of the programme's application only, even before the programme had aired. The complainant was not satisfied with the fact that the programme, which was devoted to ethnic intolerance, invited the opinion of Liāna Langa, a social activist known for her aggressive language. Having assessed the programme, the Ethics Board did not see any reason to reproach Latvian Television for non-compliance with the Code of Ethics. The programme reveals that one can become a victim on social media even for no reason and also because one's controversial actions provoke a backlash - the case of L. Langa. In the programme, Ms Langa was deliberately juxtaposed with two other interviewees who were attacked without any objective justification. The Ethics Board concludes that Ms Langa was invited to take part in the programme knowing that she had been criticised by the public for her social networking activities. During the interview, Ms Lang herself admitted that she is both a fighter and a victim. In the view of the Ethics Board, by ensuring a diversity of opinions in the programme, Latvian Television correctly reflected the division of opinion in society; the story as a whole fulfilled its purpose by showing viewers the extremes of this kind, bordering on aggressiveness and national intolerance, that are found in society.
- 2023. In 2023, the Ethics Board reviewed a complaint by a member of the Saeima about a headline on the Delfi website that stereotyped the Latvian people and insulted their dignity and honour - "Latvians are doomed to drink - how history made us a nation of alcoholics", in which the complainant stated that it was inconceivable that such an article would be possible if instead of the ethnonym "Latvians" the ethnonym "Russians", "Jews", "Germans" or any other ethnonym representing an ethnic community of Latvian society were used. The complainant considered that it was unacceptable to selectively attribute the consumption of alcohol by the Latvian society as a whole to only one nationality - Latvians and the Latvian people as an ethnic community. The Ethics Board assessed the appropriateness of the headline and the sensationalisation of the headline. The Ethics Board commented that this is one of several articles in a series of "Delphi" articles with a socially responsible aim - to draw attention to the problem of alcoholism in Latvia from different perspectives, in this particular article from a historical perspective. The Ethics Board found that the title was derived from the overall content of the article - a review of historical material - and could not be considered sensationalist. At the same time, the Ethics Board concluded that the current geopolitical situation has changed the way many people see things and such headlines and ethnic generalisations

are perceived as exacerbated; there are undeniably cases where articles and headlines are deliberately created to denigrate the Latvian people and Latvia, but the Ethics Board did not consider that this had been done in this case. It is possible that the editors' attempt to provide an insight into the publication and to attract the attention of readers with such a headline would have been perceived less harshly if the headline had been formulated as a question. In similar situations, the Ethics Board recommends that the media avoid exaggerated fatalism in headlines.

- In 2023, the Ethics Board commented on the article ""Tragic coincidence". Experts doubt Kijiva's version of the Konstantinovka hit" (Russian: "'Tragic accident'. Specialists doubt Kiev's version of the Konstantinovka strike"). The Ethics Board concluded that the article respected basic ethical principles: it also reflected the opinion of Ukrainian officials, provided the context of the events, and used credible sources, the same version of events described by The New York Times. The Ethics Board concludes that in a context of limited information availability, as in the case of reporting on the conduct of hostilities, it may be difficult for the media to report with even greater accuracy and to ascertain the truth, which may lead to different versions of events, including those that see the event as a tragic and unintended accident. The editor-in-chief of "rus.delfi.lv", in an explanation to the Ethics Board, pointed out that the editorial office has no reason to doubt the version of events, but if the conclusions of "The New York Times" are also found to be inaccurate or erroneous, or if unheard and unverifiable facts come to light, the portal is ready to clarify the publications and to publish a separate article about the case. The reply stresses that the position of the media outlet with regard to the Russian attack on Ukraine remains unchanged - "Delfi" supports the struggle of the Ukrainian people and condemns the aggressive, terrorist and illegal actions of Russia. However, the editor believes that in wartime, incidents where military personnel or civilians suffer as a result of *friendly* fire cannot be ruled out, but the media should also report on such incidents. The Ethics Board concluded that while the media coverage of such events may not be acceptable to many, the coverage of wartime events is a test for the media and for society, as the expectations of journalists and different groups in society inevitably come into conflict with the basic principles of media ethics - diversity of opinion, objectivity, fact-checking. While the professional values of neutrality and objectivity may not be acceptable to many in the wake of war, the Ethics Board expressed its conviction that these values are essential for quality journalism and that efforts to uphold them in the long term outweigh the occasional mistakes that inevitably occur in the work of any media outlet.
- 2023. In 2023, commenting on a complaint about a piece in which the presenter of a TV24 programme expressed spontaneous human emotion - sympathy - after seeing a gruesome death scene of Russian soldiers in Ukraine filmed on a war field, Skaidrīte Lasmane, a member of the Ethics Board, concluded that the journalist had found himself in an ambiguous situation with contradictory aspects: The human response to the horrors of war and humanity will come into conflict with political correctness - which side of the war is it acceptable to sympathise with the suffering and horror of the soldiers.
- In 2023, the Ethics Board's Opinion No 9/2023 addressed a complaint by the German-Baltic Chamber of Commerce (AHK) against a publication on the "nra.lv"

website, in which the author had stated: "Nine years since the Russian attack on Ukraine have provided ample evidence that the Germans mistakenly celebrated their recapture of Königsberg from Russia on 27 March 2014 at a feast in Riga in exchange for Russia's permission to take Crimea and more territory from Ukraine." The publication went on to explain this to readers with reference to an excerpt published in the portal's sister newspaper "Neatkarīgā" on 17 June 2014: "All the speeches were politically correct, of course, but beyond what was said there remained the sense that the Germans were happily excited by Russia's example of revising the borders drawn after the Second World War." The Ethics Board concluded that the author's subjective opinion, without any factual basis, had been presented as news and found a violation of the Code of Ethics.

- In 2023, the Ethics Board reviewed a complaint about the headline "Tragic loss of life of 17-year-old Russian hockey player; his killers can be found in Latvia" on the "jauns.lv" website. The reader perceived the headline as misleading and defamatory of Latvia, as the article implied that the athlete had died after being bitten by a tick in Russia. According to the Ethics Board, headlines are often creative - they often highlight one perspective in order to be "juicy" and attract attention. In this case, however, the headline was not correct and was made in the worst traditions of the yellow press - exaggerated and misleading, while the use of the idiom "murderers" in combination with the word "Latvia" rightly offends a section of the public, creating a negative image of Latvia. In this situation, sticking to the title as it was, it would have been correct to write the word "murderers" in quotation marks in order to avoid misinterpretation of the title. The Ethics Board was of the opinion that, even when using figurative expressions - metaphors, proverbs, sayings - the media should always consider what the context of perception might be, how the public will perceive it, and whether their use is in line with the basic principles of media ethics.
- In 2023, the Ethics Board examined a complaint that two news websites, when republishing a foreign media story about Pope Francis' remarks in an interview, had created headlines that were not in line with the content of the story - they included the claim that the Pope was trying to soften Russia's responsibility for the war in Ukraine and to justify Russia's invasion. The Ethics Board concluded that the war has prompted many people, including journalists, to take an active stance against those who started and supported the war, and that such a stance is expected of other people and organisations, especially public figures. However, it also creates the risk of becoming intolerant of those who speak out on other aspects of this tragic subject and of ignoring the context of the statements. The Ethics Board found that in the passages quoted in the foreign press, Pope Francis had expressed his thoughts in response to questions put to him, but that it was not to be inferred from them that he was in any way trying to soften Russia's responsibility, to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and that it was therefore not correct to make such headlines. While respecting the editorial independence of the media and the right to express one's opinion, the Ethics Board recalled that the principles of the Code of Ethics require that opinion be distinguished from facts and that sensationalisation be avoided.

- In 2023, the Ethics Board commented on a complaint about a journalist's private statements on the platform "X" (then: "Twitter"). The Ethics Board found that the journalist, on his private Twitter account, had expressed support for Armands Putsche's view, expressed on another website, that the ideology of imperialism and fascism had taken root in Russian society, was being spread outside Russia and was a threat to Europe, including Latvia, and that these manifestations had to be combated. Armands Puče has used figurative expressions to describe them - "moth-eaten", "must be debugged", etc. The Ethics Board was of the opinion that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has changed the way many people look at the aggressor state, and that this attitude is not hidden either: in various types of media the topic of war and the aggressor state, people's personal positions have taken a greater role, and emotions are inevitable. However, when used and perceived outside their original context, such emotional and figurative expressions can be misunderstood and also perceived as generalisations about people with a particular national or ethnic background. The Ethics Board believes that people should be aware of the pressures of these circumstances, pay attention to their own means of expression and linguistic culture; it is important that our actions and expressions do not make us worse off, and also that they are not misunderstood or easily used to escalate tensions, dehumanise or incite hatred. Journalists, in particular, should be aware of this - they are expected to be more responsible and respectful communicators, even in their personal expressions.
- In 2022, a complaint about the content of the front page of the newspaper "Segodnyaya + Nedelya" alleged incitement to national hatred. The publisher of the newspaper, Mass Media Group Ltd, presented the publication to the Ethics Board and explained that it was a comment by the President of a non-governmental organisation on the decision of the Ministry of Economy to stop public communication in Russian as of 1 September. The Ethics Board, having examined the publication, concluded that, although the pictorial application on the cover of the publication and the accompanying illustrations produced by the editorial staff may have exacerbated the views expressed in the publication, the publication itself and the views expressed therein did not contain any signs of incitement to hatred. The author's opinion can be agreed with or disagreed with, but the author has the right to express it and the media has the right to publish it, since polarised opinions such as this are also acceptable in a debate. The Ethics Board expressed the hope that the editorial board of the newspaper would pay more attention to the diversity of the content when providing the public with an overview of current issues and placing opinions in the newspaper - for example, when addressing the issue of the state language in Latvia, it would be valuable to include different opinions in the newspaper, such as those defending the role of the state language in Latvia.
- In 2022, the Ethics Board, in its Opinion No 6/2022, examined a complaint regarding two opinion articles on the tvnet.lv portal. The Ethics Board, having assessed the application and the explanations provided by the media outlet, found no ethical violations in both cases. By referring to the monument in Pārdaugava as a "monument to the occupiers", the Board considers that the complainant and "tvnet.lv" refer to the name of the monument differently in the article: the media refers to the occupying power and the praise of its army, while the complainant considers that it refers to the people who go

to the monument. In this context, the Ethics Board considered that the occupation of Latvia is a fact of history and that the media's explanation of the choice of the name of the monument in Pārdaugava is justified. The Ethics Board also acknowledged that the media is entitled to use various terms in its publications, including those that are generally accepted and used in the public sphere. For the article "Get out of Latvia!" The majority of the Ethics Board found that it expressed an opinion that did not violate the limits of freedom of expression, but two members of the Ethics Board considered that it was an unjustified generalisation aimed at stirring up emotions and polarising society; in difficult and tense circumstances, it would be particularly important for the media to maintain professional standards, which include responsibility, and the fact that the material in question was an opinion piece did not exempt it from this obligation.

- In 2022, the Ethics Board, in its Opinion No 8/2022, examined a complaint about the publication of the newspaper "Bauskas Dzīve" "'It's enough to bring everything on a tray!"; Ukrainians should start thinking about their own livelihood", which was published in the newspaper and on the portal and was devoted to social support and employment issues in the region. The Ethics Board found no breach of ethics as it concluded that the newspaper had delved into the issues, presented competent sources, including those with a more critical view, provided context, and the headline had highlighted one of the points made in the article by using a partial quote from one of the sources. The Ethics Board also concluded that such a headline, which is intended to draw the attention of readers, may nevertheless appear confusing and irrelevant to the content of the article and, although there was no breach of the professional and ethical principles of journalism, the Ethics Board recommended that the editors should observe the principle of accuracy in the choice of headlines for material on controversial issues in society. The Ethics Board also drew the media's attention to the fact that Ukrainian refugees may have a higher proportion of vulnerable persons than Latvian refugees, so it would be important to include the Ukrainian perspective in stories about refugees. It is true that this approach cannot be expected or required in every media piece on the topic, but it would be desirable in the overall coverage of the topic.

Covid-19

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the public was polarised about the existence of the disease, its severity, government restrictions, containment and treatment methods. Ideas of absolute individual freedom and the right to disregard others came into conflict during the pandemic with ideas of solidarity, responsibility, the need to endure inconvenience, and trust in government and science.

Skaidrīte Lasmane, a member of the Ethics Board, expressed the view that in times of such crises, the media has a great capacity to shape the emotional mood and that Latvian media and journalists during the Covid-19 crisis created a reasonable, balanced and cooperative emotional mood, helped to overcome unnecessary fear, confusion, chaos caused by ignorance and to

strengthen active participation in overcoming the crisis. Ms Lasmane explained that in such crisis situations, when people and values are at stake, neutrality is not possible, it is even immoral and dangerous, no matter how much one may not formally want it.

The Ethics Board's opinions on media material dealing with events during the Covid-19 pandemic show that there are situations where the purpose of the publication and the overall benefit of society justify both questionable journalistic methods to establish the truth, and situations where journalists and publicists must respect the principles of integrity - the desire to take sides in a crisis is no excuse for spreading false information that violates the honour and dignity of others.

- Opinion No 5/2022 concludes that TV3 news broadcasters had disseminated unverified, untruthful news defamatory to the honour of the deceased A. Cimdaras, which was widely disseminated by other media - namely that A. Cimdaras, the former head of the Central Election Commission, who died of Covid-19, may have had a falsified vaccination certificate. It is possible that this unofficial and as yet unverified information was relevant for the television, for example, to underline that the deceased had not been vaccinated, to confirm that unvaccinated people have a higher risk of dying from Covid-19, or to refute the arguments circulating in society that vaccination does not prevent complications of the disease, or the even more extreme view that it is vaccination that kills people. However, the Ethics Board considered that, given the sensitive context of the case, the sensationalisation of unverified news was unduly hasty: where the issue at stake is indirectly linked to the death of a person, the media should rely only on verified facts and particularly cautious and thorough research into the sources of information. Inadequate research into the matter may bring dishonour to the memory of the deceased and may leave the media unable to defend itself. In the present case, the media's action in publishing anecdotal information purporting to show that such a person had acted criminally was hasty and unjustified. The Ethics Board stressed that at the time of publication, there were no circumstances which would have warranted immediate publication, for example to prevent potential immediate harm or danger to public health, rather than awaiting the outcome of the investigation or merely reporting that the police were investigating the circumstances of the case.
- In its Opinion No 13/2021 on an opinion article published on the portal "tvnet.lv" by the portal's publicist, the Ethics Board examined a complaint by the singer Aminata that her public explanation of the cancellation of concerts due to the epidemiological situation and the restrictions imposed by the country was interpreted in the publication as her opposition to some restrictions due to the epidemiological situation and was equated with another person's opinion on the vaccination certificate as a Nazi tool. The Ethics Board recognised that such a statement may be unduly offensive to Aminat's dignity and honour and stressed that, although an opinion is not subject to the test of truth, it must be based on facts if they are ascertainable at the time the opinion is expressed. Given that the media outlet did, however, correct the article, the Ethics Board considers that the media outlet acted in accordance with the values and principles enshrined in the Association's Code of Ethics.

- In its Opinion No 2/2021, the Ethics Board examined a complaint that the TV3 programme "Bez Tabu" contained biased information and violated the complainant's right to privacy. The complainant stated that the story published private correspondence without her consent, that the journalist did not inform her that the telephone conversation was being recorded and that she was not given time to prepare for the interview. The complainant did not consent to the use of the recorded conversation in the preparation of the story, and the written explanation she sent was not reflected in the story. The complainant's name, place of work and position were mentioned in the story, which she did not consider necessary in the public interest. The Ethics Board concluded that the story was made on an issue of public importance, portraying a disparaging and nihilistic attitude towards public health and the restrictions and precautions imposed to contain the Covid-19 pandemic. The Ethics Board considers that the media has a duty to report on issues and events of particular public importance, including the Covid-19 pandemic, which is directly linked to public health risks and is therefore of concern and interest to a very wide public. In the opinion of the Ethics Board, it could not be concluded that the preparation of the story violated the principles enshrined in the Association's Code of Ethics, since it is important to show the various prejudices prevailing in society about the seriousness of the disease and its possible impact on the health of any person. Although Article 7(3) of the Law on the Press and Other Mass Media prohibits the publication of correspondence of individuals without their consent, the Ethics Board considers that the public has the right to be fully informed about situations dangerous to public safety. In the view of the Ethics Board, in the situation in question, the benefit to the public of the information contained in the story outweighed the potential harm to the person concerned. At the same time, the Ethics Board stresses that the use of correspondence in the story in question proves the truthfulness of the statements made therein; however, in general, the publication of correspondence should be allowed only in cases of extreme necessity, as the publication of personal correspondence may cause significant damage to the interests of private individuals.
- In its Opinion No 7/2021 on the LTV programme "Forbidden Technique", which dealt with the issue of antibodies to Covid-19, the Ethics Board ruled on the ethics of a journalist conducting tests on scientific issues without a scientific basis, when the issue is of public interest. It should be recalled here that at the time of the programme's production, there were differing public opinions on the effectiveness of Covid-19 vaccines. The Ethics Board was divided on this issue and on the vote, and decided by six votes in favour and three against that the programme did not comply with the Association's Code of Ethics, given the sensitivity of the issue raised in the programme and the methodology used to reach its conclusions. The Ethics Board stressed that a study not conducted with due diligence does more harm to the overall quality of journalism, undermines trust in professional media and scientists and the organisation of the socially important vaccination process than it increases the public good. While the ideological question raised in the programme about unanswered questions of public interest in the organisation of the vaccination process is important and its in-depth exploration is welcome, it is important from a professional ethical point of view that the programme makers are able to conduct high-quality scientific research in order to base their conclusions on verified and scientifically sound analysis rather than on conclusions

drawn from fragmentary, unscientific and contradictory information. Nor is it acceptable to shift responsibility for unprofessional media practices to third parties who are supposedly supposed to refute the conclusions reached, since the results and conclusions of research must first be critically assessed by the researchers themselves. The Ethics Board was critical of the ability of journalists without specialist knowledge to conduct scientific research on issues where the research is complex and conducted under the guidance of suitably qualified specialists. Journalists have a duty to investigate the problems that exist in society, but in the view of the Ethics Board, in the absence of a sufficient scientific basis for scientific research, journalists should confine themselves to journalistic research of an issue, which does not provide a basis for drawing scientific conclusions, but rather for obtaining and identifying arguments and considerations necessary for in-depth research and discussion of the issue. However, in any experimental research, consistency in data collection and analysis must be strictly maintained, and basic ethical principles must be respected in generalising conclusions, including avoiding the publication of misleading information and exaggerations.

Anti-media discourse

Public interest in and efforts to influence the media can be justified by genuine concern for the quality of media content, compliance with the Code of Ethics and other journalistic standards, as well as by so-called anti-media discourse - actions aimed at intimidating journalists, exerting pressure, demonstrating power, and consuming journalists' attention and resources. Most of these actions are carried out by attacking the media in the public sphere (broadcasts, posts and comments on social media), in the private sphere (sending threats or abusive messages to journalists in person), threatening and filing complaints with the courts, the police and a wide range of state institutions and non-governmental organisations. Although such motivations are difficult to prove, there are also some indications of attempts to use the media's self-regulatory mechanisms for such purposes, by lodging complaints with the Association. It should be noted that referral to the Association is considered to be the correct method, as the handling of complaints is a core function of the Association, and it is only by examining the complaint that conclusions can be drawn as to its validity and the media outlet's compliance with the Code of Ethics.

Here are examples of complaints where targeting the media could be interpreted as self-serving.

- In 2024, the Ethics Board took note of a complaint about a journalist's opinion expressed on the Delfi TV programme "Next, Please!" 14.05.2024 and concluded that the journalist had expressed her opinion while discussing climate change with politicians Ainārs Šlesers and Vilis Krištopans, and that it was obvious that a battle of opinions was taking place. The Ethics Board explained to the complainant that the host of the programme, not only the guests, may also have a right to an opinion, that opinions are subjective, and

that a journalist also has the right to hyperbolise his opinion when taking part in such a discussion.

- In 2024, the Ethics Board took note of a complaint about the fact that the Latvian Television programme "Kultūršoks" interviewed the political activist L. Lang in a story about intolerance in society. The Ethics Board concluded that the complaint was filed before the programme was broadcast and was based solely on its application. Having viewed the programme in its entirety, the Ethics Board saw no reason for reproach - by ensuring a diversity of opinions in the programme, Latvian Television correctly reflected the division of opinions prevailing in society. The story was generally appropriate for its purpose - to show the extremes of this kind in society, bordering on aggressiveness and national intolerance.
- In 2023, the Ethics Board received a complaint that the investigative journalism centre Re:Baltica, together with the Russian-language media outlet Chaika in Daugavpils, had added a Russian-language text to a mobile editorial tent in Daugavpils alongside a Latvian-language invitation to visit the editorial office, thus stereotyping the residents of Daugavpils. The Ethics Board concluded that the accusation of unethical behaviour by Re:Baltica had no basis - journalists have the right to involve different groups of society in the production of material. Having familiarised itself with the context of the application and the complainant's previous contact with Re:Baltica, the Ethics Board noted that the complainant had already published rude and derogatory social media posts about Re:Baltica journalists in the past and the Ethics Board of the political party "National Alliance" (the complainant is a member) had concluded that his actions were not in line with ethical principles of the party and called on him to comply with them.
- In 2020, in response to a submission from an organisation overseeing the media sector regarding a critical opinion of the editor of the newspaper "Neatkarīgās Tukuma Ziņas" on the funding and oversight of the media sector, the Ethics Board expressed the opinion that it is not desirable to twist every statement of a person in a way that could be considered as publishing false information - every person has the right to an opinion.

Aspects related to freedom of expression and the right to an opinion

The ethical aspects of freedom of expression have been addressed in a series of opinions and comments by the Ethics Board on views expressed by journalists themselves and by third parties. Although the opinions of the Ethics Board often refer to judgments of the European Court of Human Rights protecting freedom of expression and are widely referred to by the media themselves, the opinions and comments of the Ethics Board show that, from an ethical point of view, the content and form of the opinions expressed may be more nuanced: in specific

situations, taking into account the various nuances, the context and the fact that the opinion is expressed by the media, what is permissible in law may be inappropriate or questionable from a media ethics point of view.

Interviews

Although universal human rights and the Constitution protect freedom of expression, this principle is not always understood or accepted when people are being interviewed by someone they do not like, or when the opinion itself seems offensive, contains untrue facts, etc. Such complaints have been received both about the media's choice to interview politicians, including those convicted of criminal offences, and about statements made by another interviewee.

- In 2023, the Ethics Board, in two complaints about the media's choice to interview certain politicians, took the view that the answers given in interviews should be regarded as a person's opinion, protected by the principle of freedom of expression, even if the opinion expressed is not liked by others, appears undesirable, is not shared, appears distorted or false, and even if the person interviewed does not support democracy as a form of governance. It is true that freedom of expression is not absolute and has limits, for example, when hatred and discrimination are incited, public calls are made against the independence, sovereignty or territorial unity of Latvia, state power or state order, genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes are justified, calls are made for genocide - aggressive war, etc. Commenting on the conduct of the media, the Ethics Board noted that the principle of freedom of the press provides that the media is entitled to determine how and with what considerations interviews are conducted, how critically the journalist treats the interviewee, how comfortable or uncomfortable questions are asked, whether clarifying questions are asked, whether he critically assesses and challenges what the interviewee says, whether he is oriented to the subject, whether he also records his own remarks in the published material. The way in which the same person is interviewed by different media can vary greatly.
- In 2023, when reviewing a complaint about an interview on the portal "delfi.lv", in which the interviewee equated right-wing parties with Nazis, and the media used this quote in the title of the article, the Ethics Board expressed the opinion that there was no violation of the Code of Ethics in the publication - the journalist had asked correct, non-biased questions, and the title clearly stated that a quote from the interview had been used. Although the word "Nazis" is widely used in society in places and sometimes, unfortunately, inappropriately, with everyone using the term with a different meaning, and although on any issue there will be readers who disagree with the interviewee, the journalist is not obliged to question the interviewee's views and insights. Nor can the media be held responsible for what the interviewee says; nor is an editorial comment on every interview necessary. The Ethics Board agreed with the media's argument that punishing a journalist for helping to disseminate statements made by another person

would seriously hinder and even undermine the press's contribution to the debate on issues of public importance.

Opinion articles

While the right to express an opinion is a fundamental human right, it may not be a given for everyone. In 2023, the Ethics Board heard a complaint questioning the right of an editor to express an opinion in an editorial opinion column. The Ethics Board commented to the complainant that a journalist has the right to express his or her opinion like any other human being, but when publishing it in the media it must be clearly separated from the news, as was the case here, so there is no basis for the objection - it is contrary to the principle of freedom of expression enshrined in the Constitution and in the Association's Code of Ethics.

Freedom of expression has wide boundaries, and opinions expressed in the media also have the right to be harsh, offensive and provocative. However, from the point of view of media ethics, what matters is the content of the opinion, the reasoning, the form of expression and whether the opinion is accompanied by facts. Consequently, the principles of media ethics also apply to so-called opinion pieces.

- In Opinions Nos 11/2022, 6/2022, 2/2022 and 5/2001 on the views expressed by journalists and columnists in the editorial opinion columns of various media, the Ethics Board concluded that the media had not violated the Code of Ethics: although the opinions were critical and harsh, they were well-founded and not based on false facts.
- In 2022, in a comment on an opinion article in the newspaper *Сегодня + Неделя*, the Ethics Board concluded: although the illustrative application on the cover of the publication and the accompanying illustrations by the editors may have aggravated the opinion expressed in the publication, the publication itself and the opinion expressed in it did not contain any signs of incitement to hatred. The author's opinion can be agreed with or disagreed with, but the author has the right to express it and the media has the right to publish it, since polarised opinions such as this are also acceptable in a debate. The Ethics Board expressed the hope that the editorial board of the newspaper would pay more attention to the diversity of the content when providing the public with an overview of current issues and placing opinions in the newspaper, e.g. when discussing the issue of the state language in Latvia, it would be valuable to include different opinions in the newspaper, such as those defending the role of the state language in Latvia.
- Similarly, in response to a complaint, the Ethics Board in 2024 concluded about an opinion published on the portal "lsm.lv" - the mere fact that someone does not like a particular opinion does not mean that the ethicality of a media outlet publishing a person's opinion should be questioned.

- In its Opinion No 2/2024, the Ethics Board found violations of the principles of integrity, non-discrimination, non-incitement to hatred and respect in the opinion article published on the portal "la.lv". The Ethics Board took the view that authors undoubtedly have the right to use vivid forms of expression and to provoke, but that there are limits beyond which the publication loses its journalistic quality and becomes an expression of emotional outpouring which, rather than primarily illuminating and explaining the subject, grossly offends some readers. The Ethics Board found dehumanisation, calls for discrimination, generalisations, prejudices, disproportionate offence - a set of characteristics of hate speech - in this publication. The publication in question was an opinion piece, and editorial responsibility is also relevant in such cases. The Ethics Board recalled that, even when publishing opinion articles, the media outlet is obliged to ensure that the published material and even readers' comments do not contain hate speech, incitements to violence and other activities prohibited by law; when such non-compliance is detected, it must be remedied as soon as possible, including through self-regulatory mechanisms.
- In its Opinion No 13/2021 on the opinion article published on the portal "tvnet.lv", the Ethics Board concluded that it contained a comparison that was unjustifiably offensive to the complainant's honour and dignity, as her opinion had been unjustifiably compared to another person's opinion on the vaccination certificate as a Nazi tool. The Ethics Board stressed that, although an opinion is not subject to a test of truth in case-law, it must be based on facts if they are ascertainable at the time the opinion is expressed.

The Ethics Board found that the Code of Ethics had been breached in a number of offensive pieces which did not clearly distinguish facts from opinions, giving the misleading impression that the statements and assumptions made in the article were factual or based on fact, when no verification of the information had been carried out. The mere fact that a publication has the characteristics of an opinion piece does not mean that the information contained therein, especially if it has offended anyone, cannot be considered as facts and therefore also subject to the principles of information processing and fact-checking.

- In its Opinion No 7/2024 on the publication on the portal "nra.lv", which was presented as an opinion article, the Ethics Board, commenting on the violation, stated: although subjective assessment is permissible in an opinion article, criticism and the form of expression may be sharper, but the principles of media ethics are applicable to this format of articles as well. Such material, especially when it is offensive to people, must also be based on factual information. To avoid misleading the audience, they should be subject both to the principles of the distinction between opinion and fact and to the principles of fact-checking, to make it clear where fact ends and opinion begins. The Ethics Review Board concluded that the publication was based on unverified and factually unsupported allegations; it demonstrated an attempt to use false, distorted and misleading information to deliberately influence the audience. In such a publication, the facts and statements used by the journalist are also subject to the principle of fact-checking, but the Ethics Board concluded that the author of the publication and the media outlet had not checked the facts referred to in the article and that they were not

true. The Ethics Board also concluded that the aim of the publication was not to ascertain the truth but to influence the audience in a disguised manner, creating a misleading and untrue impression of the complainant's professional activity and its non-compliance with the law. In this opinion on a publication which, in the view of the Ethics Board, was purposely designed as defamatory material about a person, the failure to distinguish fact from opinion was one of several breaches of the principles of the Code of Ethics. In an attempt to influence the audience, the author's non-factual and misleading statements and assumptions are presented as facts in the text that follows.

- In its Opinion No 9/2023 on the publication on the portal "nra.lv", the Ethics Board expressed a similar opinion. The publication was published in the "World" section of the portal and was designed as informative material, however, in parts of it, including the introduction, offensive and defamatory statements and assumptions were highlighted and made without any factual basis. Only later in the text was it stated that the allegations had not happened but were based on the journalist's feelings.

Views expressed in discussions and publications

The comments and opinions of the Ethics Board on the compliance of opinions with the Code of Ethics are mostly made in the context of complaints about publications. In publications, it is easier for authors to separate opinions from facts by checking the material before publication. However, when hosting or taking part in discussion programmes, it is more difficult for journalists to distinguish between opinion and fact, and for viewers and listeners to distinguish where opinion begins and ends. When watching talk shows and debates, the Ethics Board has also not supported attempts to analyse and evaluate every word and argument of a journalist, in particular by taking it out of context and out of the overall discussion.

- In its Opinion No 10/2021 on a complaint about the radio programme "Afternoon" on Radio 1 of Latvia, in which an invited journalist had commented on an opinion published by another person, the Ethics Board considered that the programme expressed the journalist's opinion and was not presented as fact. The Ethics Board noted that this is how pluralism of opinions is created, but the fact that a person's opinion does not coincide with another person's opinion or is disliked by another person cannot be a sufficient basis for considering the media outlet's action in allowing the on-air personality's opinion in the case at hand to be unethical.
- In its comment in 2024 on a statement made by a journalist on the "Delfi.lv" TV programme "Next, Please!", during a discussion opposing persons who questioned the ongoing climate change, the Ethics Board pointed to the right of a journalist to express an opinion even if it is exaggerated or provocative.
- In 2020, in response to a letter from the NEPLP regarding a publication in the newspaper "Neatkarīgās Tukuma ziņas", which included a transcript of a discussion held with the President of Latvia on media policy issues, the Ethics Board drew the complainant's

attention to the fact that an opinion cannot be subject to a truth test. In the view of the Ethics Board, it is not desirable to twist every statement made by a person in such a way that it could be regarded as the publication of false information. In the event that an opinion about a person or an organisation contains unfounded, defamatory or libellous information, the offended person has the right to take action against the offender using civil law instruments.

- In its Opinion No 16/2021, the Ethics Board examined a complaint regarding the publication of the portal "nra.lv". The complainant pointed out that although the article was defined as research material, the information contained therein was based solely on the opinion of the journalist concerned, and that the author had expressed his personal negative assessment, as well as false and misleading information, conjectures and assumptions. The Ethics Board concluded that the article, although called a study, was superficial, including the use of terms such as "common knowledge", which were not supported by evidence. The Ethics Board found that the article was driven by an emotional and biased interest without a properly reasoned justification. The Ethics Board found that the article violated several points of the Code of Ethics, including the principle of the distinction between facts and opinions.

In several opinions and comments, the Ethics Board has taken the position that the principles of ethics can also be applied to the means of expression and behaviour of a journalist, linking this to respect for the principle of dignity set out in the Code of Ethics.

- In 2021, at the request of the NEPLP, the Ethics Board expressed its opinion on the style of interviewing in the Latvian Television programme "Today's Question", stating that, according to the standards of professional journalistic ethics, it is permissible to ask uncomfortable and direct questions to interviewees. At the same time, the presenter of the programme must observe the generally accepted basic principles of courtesy and respect, which apply to the use of intonation, gestures, forms of address of high-ranking public officials, respect for neutrality and avoidance of biased inclusion of personal opinions and positions in the conversation. Although the Ethics Board did not find a specific violation of the Code of Ethics of the Association in the situation in question, it did find a violation of Article 4.7 of the Code of Ethics. The Ethics Board also noted that the Code of Ethics 7.7 (Dignity) contained elements of a violation of Article 7 (Respect) - the sometimes aggressive and attacking intonation of the programme hosts, the repeated unjustified interruptions of the speech of the government representatives, the inclusion of a personal position in the conversation, as well as the inappropriate use of forms of address towards the interviewees, which also gave the impression of intolerant and potentially unethical behaviour of the journalists. The Ethics Board also notes that it is not advisable to ask challenging questions of a personal nature during interviews which are not relevant to the purpose of the programme but which reinforce the impression of a lack of respect.
- In its Opinion No 11/2020 on the opinion article in the media "Tukuma Balss", the Ethics Board found signs of a violation of the principle of dignity - an *ad hominem* insult directed against a person, which does not comply with the elementary level of morality

and media culture and is therefore unacceptable and inadmissible in the practice of journalism. In the opinion of the Ethics Board, the use of such statements in media materials is contrary to the principle of respect and mutual communication enshrined in Article 4.7 of the Code of Ethics of the Association.

- In its Opinion No 13/2020 on the publication of the portal "nra.lv", the Ethics Board called on the media to pay attention to the vocabulary in order to facilitate mutual understanding of the parties on a specific issue without giving the impression that the author of the article intended to deliberately offend a person in a negative way.

Medicine

In dealing with complaints about the media's coverage of medical issues, the Ethics Board has explained that media material related to medical treatment should be assessed as particularly sensitive, bearing in mind the potential impact on human health of the information provided by the media and the importance of credible opinions.

- In its Opinion No 8/2021 on the publication of the portal "nra.lv", the Ethics Board pointed out that the suitability of a specific therapy is basically assessed by a doctor treating a specific person, but the conclusions expressed in the article are uncritically based on a single source. Media coverage of medical and other sensitive issues should either choose to explore the issue analytically, ensuring a diversity of views by drawing on a variety of related opinions from different sources, or, in the case of an opinion piece, provide full information about the author of the opinion piece. When a journalist's opinion is published, it should be clearly distinguished from the facts.
- In its already mentioned Opinion No 7/2021 on the LTV programme "Forbidden Technique", which dealt with the issue of antibodies to Covid-19, the Ethics Board ruled in a unanimous vote that the study in question, which was not conducted with due care, was more detrimental to the overall quality of journalism, undermined trust in professional media and scientists and the organisation of the socially important vaccination process than it increased public benefit. (*Note: at the time of writing, there were divergent public opinions on the effectiveness of Covid-19 vaccines.*) While the ideological issue of unanswered questions of public interest in the organisation of the vaccination process raised in the programme is an important one, and its in-depth exploration is welcome, it is important from a professional ethical point of view that the programme makers are able to conduct high-quality scientific research in order to base their conclusions on verified and scientifically sound analysis rather than on judgements drawn from fragmentary, unscientific and contradictory information. Nor is it acceptable to shift responsibility for unprofessional media practices to third parties who are supposedly supposed to refute the conclusions reached, since the results and conclusions of the research must first be critically assessed by the researchers themselves. The Ethics Board was critical of the ability of journalists without specialist knowledge to conduct

scientific research on issues where the research is complex and conducted under the guidance of suitably qualified specialists. However, in any experimental research, consistency in data collection and analysis must be strictly maintained, and the generalisation of conclusions must respect basic ethical principles, including the avoidance of misleading presentation and exaggeration.

Representation of vulnerable people

- In 2022, in a comment on an episode of the Helio Media reality show "Dinner with Your Own" on "STV Pirmā", in which a child put a butter knife in his mouth, the Ethics Board of the LFJE concluded that the episode showed a minor child in a dangerous situation, without taking into account that parents may not be able to assess the harm caused to the child and that viewers may perceive such a situation as acceptable and imitable. The inclusion of such an episode in the programme is contrary to the implementation of the values of the Code of Ethics in the work of the medium. The Code of Ethics requires the exercise of sensitivity towards vulnerable persons and special care in dealing with minors. Although the programme was commissioned by independent producers, the Ethics Boards considered that Helio Media had an editorial responsibility to assess the material before it was broadcast - the company should have a permanent mechanism for editorial control of programmes before they are broadcast.
- In 2023, in a commentary on the storyline of the 360TV show "Family in a Jar" by Helio Media, in which the protagonists abandon their dog Mailo, chained in a strange place, the Ethics Board highlighted two problems: the cruelty of the "heroes" of the show and the role and responsibility of the medium, which can be both educative and valuable, and irresponsible. In this situation, the Ethics Board focused more on the role of the medium. Although the media took action after the story was broadcast, in the face of public outrage, and ensured that the dog was placed in better conditions and that the relationship with the "heroes" of the show was terminated, the Ethics Board considers that the media had not been aware of the situation and dealt with it in time, even though it had the opportunity to do so. In order to avoid such situations, the Ethics Board recommends that the media strengthen the role of editors and exercise closer oversight of outsourced content. This helps both to prevent unacceptable situations from arising during filming and to allow undesirable events to be turned to their advantage before they are broadcast. At the same time, the Ethics Board acknowledged that various issues and controversial situations need to be discussed with the public, including such content, encouraging each individual to examine his or her own moral values. However, even in situations where disturbing or shocking content has been produced, whether planned or

unplanned, there are opportunities to inform the audience more fully about what has happened behind the scenes and how events will develop, for example by indicating that what was seen was staged, that no one was hurt, what the fate of the characters is or how events will unfold in the future.

- In 2023, commenting on a TV3 programme "Bez Tabu" story about a woman living in a makeshift hut in a dune area, the Ethics Board concluded that there was no need to include specific location references in the story, as a person living in a makeshift hut in a public space is less protected than someone living in a private and well-maintained property.
- In its Opinion No 8/2022, the Ethics Board drew the attention of the media to the fact that Ukrainian refugees may include a higher proportion of vulnerable persons than Latvian citizens, therefore it would be important to reflect the Ukrainian perspective in materials about refugees. It is true that this approach cannot be expected or required in every media piece on the topic, but it would be desirable in the overall coverage of the topic.

Infringement of public values

- In 2023, the Ethics Board commented on the glorification of alcohol consumption in the "jauns.lv" publication "Dž. J. Jillinger reaches four per mille intoxication". The Ethics Board acknowledged that many of the portal's publications are designed to entertain, leaving the reader sufficient freedom to form his or her own view of the events covered, but it considered that the publication highlighted and praised the self-directed and excessive consumption of alcohol. The Ethics Board considers that by making publications about celebrities and so-called opinion leaders and by giving drinking an admirable lightness of touch, excessive drinking is normalised. Presenting information in an entertaining way does not diminish the glorifying effect of this publication and is not socially responsible.
- In 2023, the Ethics Board reviewed a complaint about the headline "Tragic loss of life of 17-year-old Russian hockey player; his killers can be found in Latvia" on the "jauns.lv" website. The reader perceived the headline as misleading and defamatory of Latvia, as the article implied that the athlete had died after being bitten by a tick in Russia. In the Ethics Board's view, headlines are often creative - they often highlight one perspective in order to be "juicy" and attract attention; however, in this case the headline was exaggerated and misleading, and the use of the idiom "murderer" in combination with the word "Latvia" offends a section of the public, creating a negative image of Latvia. In this situation, sticking to the headline, it would have been correct to write the word "murderers" in quotation marks to avoid misinterpretation of the headline. The Ethics Board considered that, even when using figurative expressions - metaphors, proverbs, sayings - the media should always consider what the context of perception may be, how

the public will perceive it and whether their use is in line with the basic principles of media ethics.

- In 2022, the Ethics Board commented on a submission regarding the publication of the "jauns.lv" portal "140 kg singer Lizo shows off the flashy wedding dress for round brides". The Ethics Board considered that certain elements of the publication verged on breaches of ethics. By trying to attract the attention of readers through criticism, the medium can easily cross the boundaries where comments made about dress and taste can be applied to a person's personality, appearance and thus impose "acceptable" body standards or what people with certain bodies should and should not do. Crossing boundaries often leads to the cultivation of prejudices and stereotypes, shaming, objectification and sexualisation of the human body. For the Ethics Board, it is not that the media cannot criticise, but the language and the way in which criticism is expressed. At the same time, the Ethics Board also discussed the importance of public figures providing their followers with positive examples of good style, creating awareness of good taste, of the proportionality of natural endowments to clothing choices, rather than merely promoting complete freedom from "complexes".
- In 2023, the Ethics Board examined a complaint about the Latvian Radio's "Ķēpa na sirds" programme and the subsequent publication on the portal, which presented Latvia as a backward country in the field of animal welfare. In response to the complaint, the editorial board of Latvijas Radio had acknowledged the discrepancies and issued a clarification. The Ethics Board commented that the programme makers had been careless and that it was important to quote sources accurately in stories, especially when making loud statements. The Ethics Board considers that the media has the right to be critical of its own country, but that criticism must be justified and meaningful. In this case, it was not proportionate and correct. However, the Ethics Board did not consider that the programme makers had a desire to undermine Latvia's statehood; rather, they lacked the ability to interpret and correctly present data.
- In 2022, the Ethics Board commented on a complaint about publications on the "jauns.lv" and "la.lv" portals about a popular video on the Facebook platform, which was presented by its publisher as having been filmed in the Rezekne region. It was later revealed that the video was filmed in Yakutia. These publications could initially be considered as so-called fake news, but later the media reacted to the information provided by readers about the origin of the video and corrected and supplemented the article. In the view of the Ethics Board, this case shows that the issue of accuracy and verification of information published in the media is still relevant; in another situation, the publication of unverified information could have more serious consequences. The veracity of information in the media is also linked to public trust in the media, but correcting and recording errors should be a matter of course for the media. It should be implemented at the headline level, for example by indicating that an article has been corrected or clarified or supplemented. It is also desirable that the article should indicate what corrections have been made and when they were made. Finally, if the error relates to the substance of the article, it should be assessed whether the information should be retracted (e.g. Apollo.lv retracted its publication about a bear fight in the Rezekne region because it was found to be false on the grounds that the video was not filmed in Latvia).

Veracity of headlines

Several submissions concerned the headlines of publications - their inconsistency with the content of the article and unacceptable content in the headlines, indicating signs of misleading and sensationalisation.

- In its Opinion No 8/2023 on Jānis Domburs' complaint about the cover of the magazine "Privātā Dzīve", the Ethics Board concluded that the magazine cover, in the tradition of the yellow press genre, attempted to arouse interest in the publication, but that the use of images and text on the cover was not sufficiently precise and could mislead the reader. The members of the Ethics Board recommended that the publisher should take greater care and responsibility in the design of the magazine's cover in order to prevent possible misleading of the audience, to avoid offending the persons featured in the publications and to maintain as good a reputation as possible for the yellow press genre.
- In 2023, the Ethics Board commented on the headline of the portal "la.lv" "PHOTO. What didn't they show us? Hot party after the coronation ceremony of King Charles III at Windsor Castle". The complainant wrote that the word "PHOTO" is used in headlines to refer to photographic reports, but the publication used images generated by artificial intelligence. The texts "What didn't they show us?" and "Hot party after the coronation ceremony of King Charles III at Windsor Castle" suggest that the article/images cover real-life events that were previously unreported to the public, but the publication is about a fictitious event. The Ethics Board came to a similar conclusion that the headline showed signs of sensationalisation: it was designed to draw attention to the publication, but in combination with the chosen illustration it did not give a true impression of the content of the article. This can only be obtained by reading the introduction to the article. However, in the view of the Ethics Board, the publication was entertainment material, and exaggerations and attempts to attract attention are common practice in entertainment media, which traditionally have been balanced on the edge of ethical principles. In this situation, it was the use of AI-generated content in the publication that attracted the attention of the Ethics Board. The Ethics Board expressed its support for the regulation of AI and for the need to label AI-generated material in the media in order to avoid misleading. For example, to make it clear that fictitious events or images, staged by artificial intelligence are involved.
- In 2024, the Ethics Board, in its commentary on the "nra.lv" publication "European Parliament Elections Will Show How Many 'Useful' and How Many 'Real' (Idiots) We Have", concluded that the provocative headline stems from the content of the article - the author's reflections on the risks posed, regardless of ethnic origin, by people who show loyalty and acquiescence to Putin and his imperial projects. In this context, the author discusses the political jargon term "useful idiot". This is expressed as an opinion, and the whole publication is designed as an opinion piece, in which the limits of freedom of

expression are wider and satire, sharp criticism, hyperbole and figurative means of expression are common.

- In 2023, the Ethics Board reviewed a complaint that the headline "Refugee supporter Ieva Raubiško faces punishment for helping at the Belarusian border" on the "LSM.lv" portal was misleading and biased, as the punishment was not for "helping" but for allegedly breaking the law. The Ethics Board concluded that the headline was based on the content of the article. The language of journalism is different from the language of laws and regulations, and it allows for deviations from official legal terms in order to make the language of the story easier for the audience to understand. The headline is a concise description of the situation presented in the publication, but the publication correctly reflects the Latvian Radio story, which includes all relevant arguments and opinions, including those of Ieva Raubiško, the Prosecutor's Office, the State Border Guard, the UN Refugee Agency in the Nordic and Baltic countries. The publication also provides legally accurate information on the specific articles of the criminal law that are the subject of the case and how they have changed over time.
- In 2023, when reviewing a complaint about an interview on the portal "delfi.lv", in which the interviewee likened the right-wing parties to Nazis and the media used this quote in the title of the article (Estonia does otherwise). The Ethics Board took the view that the publication did not violate the Code of Ethics - the journalist had asked correct, non-biased questions, and the headline, using quotation marks and publishing a photograph of the interviewee, indicated that a quotation from the interview had been used. Although the word 'Nazis' is widely used in society in places that are sometimes unfortunately inappropriate, and with different meanings for each, the journalist is not obliged to question the interviewee's views and insights.
- In 2022, the Ethics Board examined a complaint about the headline and introduction of a "tvnet.lv" publication: "How a Christian sect became the reason for the assassination of Japan's former Prime Minister Abe". The complaint stated that the use of the word "Christian" to describe the so-called Moon sect was inappropriate and that there was no justification in the article to call it a Christian sect. The Ethics Board recognised that accuracy in headlines is important and in this case it may be important to distinguish whether the so-called Moonists are to be counted as and called Christians. However, the Ethics Board considered that in this case it was more important to look at the article as a whole, taking into account the complainant's statement that, apart from the headline and the introduction, the content of the publication appeared to be of good quality.

Explaining sensitive topics

When dealing with complaints on complex and sensitive issues, even in situations where no misconduct has been found, the Ethics Board often recommends that the media better explain

the subject in order to reduce the cultivation of unnecessarily heightened emotions and prevent inaccurate and erroneous interpretations of media material.

- In its Opinion No 2/2020 on the Re:Baltica article "How National Association's members are friends with the Ukrainian far-right", the Ethics Board saw some signs of sensationalisation and exaggeration in the original title of the article. The Ethics Board stressed that the original article "How NA members are friends with the Ukrainian far-right" lacked an explanation of the basis for the sensationalisation, which the Ethics Board obtained from the authors' explanation and the subsequent article "Why we wrote about it". The Ethics Board recommended that the media material should highlight from the outset the context that would explain to the public the use of sensationalisation or exaggeration. On politically sensitive issues, it is recommended to be more careful in the choice of linguistic terms, avoiding sensationalisation, exaggeration and the cultivation of unnecessarily heightened emotions, thereby strengthening the successful application of the principles of point 4.1 of the Code of Ethics in media practice. The media should, as far as possible, seek to avoid sensationalisation, taking into account the sensitive context of the events covered, which may give rise to inaccurate and erroneous interpretations of media material.
- Opinion No 14/2021 on "rebaltica.lv" and "tvnet.lv" article "Danusēvičs is wrong - the range of goods in supermarkets is also limited elsewhere in the EU" (article on the Covid-19 pandemic), the Ethics Board did not find any violations of the Code of Ethics, but drew attention to the fact that in order to make the messages contained in the media material unambiguous, it would be useful to outline precisely the scope of the issues under investigation, as well as the nuances relevant to the assessment of the issue, to avoid an aggravated reaction of the audience to the conclusions drawn in the media material.

Reflecting the views of third parties

Right of the person to a reply

One of the basic principles of journalism is the so-called right of reply. When disseminating information critical of a person, the media must also seek to reflect that person's views. This contributes to the diversity and veracity of information. In media practice, situations in which a person is criticised are diverse - there are different media formats, different genres of publications and stories, different speeds of gathering and publishing information, different breadth and persistence of coverage of the topic on the agenda, different accessibility of persons for comment - and therefore this principle cannot be said to apply automatically, but rather to be implemented according to the specific situation.

- Opinion No 15/2021 on the publication on the portal "irlepaja.lv" concluded that the media had prepared a critical piece about a person on the basis of information provided by other persons, but had not made an effort to contact the person criticised, thus denying him the so-called right to reply. Although the media outlet tried to justify itself by explaining that the criticized party had not contacted it to present his/her own opinion, the Ethics Board drew attention to the fact that professional journalistic practice and Articles 4.2 and 4.6 of the Code of Ethics of the Association require the media outlet to produce as objective a media report as possible, listening to the views of the persons involved in the issue under consideration, even if such views seem personally unacceptable. Even if all the views of the parties involved in the situation in question are not fully reflected in the media material to be produced, proactive listening to the parties involved is essential to ethical media practice.
- Opinion No 12/2021 deals with a complaint by a person against articles reporting on the criminal proceedings against him and the activities of the companies he represents. The person stated that he had not been asked for his opinion by the media and that he disagreed with the retractions of the accusation in the article. Having heard the media's arguments that the seriousness of the accusation, the abstracts from the accusation and the size of the tax debts mentioned in the material prepared by the news agency "Leta" were indicative of the importance of the information for the public, the Ethics Board considered that the news item describing the proceedings unquestionably and unequivocally indicated that there was a dispute about the complainant's guilt of the accusation against him and ruled that there was no breach of the Code of Ethics in this situation. The Ethics Board also noted that, in the present case, the Ethics Board did not have, nor was it in a position to obtain, sufficient information to assess the evidence obtained in the course of the pre-trial investigation and the veracity of the information contained in the transcript of the indictment.
- In its Opinion No 6/2023, the Ethics Board examined a complaint by a former customs officer against a publication in the newspaper "Latvijas Avīze", which quoted a person's testimony in court that the complainant had ordered her to take bribes. The complainant stated that this was untrue and defamatory, and that the media had not asked for and included his opinion. After receiving the complaint, the media outlet supplemented the publication and explained that the criminal case in question had been heard in open court and none of the parties had any further questions or objections to what the person had testified about the former customs officer. Nor was there any collateral decision in the criminal case to prosecute the witness for knowingly giving false testimony. In the view of the Ethics Board, the editorial addition to the publication was exhaustive.
- In its Opinion No 16/2021, the Ethics Board examined a complaint regarding the publication of the portal "nra.lv". The complainant stated that the information contained therein is based solely on the conjectures and assumptions of the journalist concerned, contains false information, is biased towards negative emotional assessments without any connection to real facts, thus creating a false and negatively biased impression of both specific projects and the wind energy industry in general. The complainant pointed out that although the headline is general, the content of the article is not essentially about the industry, but is directed at a specific trader, and the author has not contacted the

company to clarify or clarify the facts in the article concerning the complainant and its planned activities. The Ethics Board found that the article infringed several points of the Code of Ethics, including that it did not include sources, documents or other evidence to substantiate the allegations made in the article and did not seek the views of the applicant. Although the title of the article generalises its subject and refers to it as a study, it mainly deals with projects of the company concerned, which would have made it necessary to hear its views.

Third-party reporting - obligation or choice?

- In 2020, the Ethics Board responded to a request from the media regulator NEPLP to examine a submission by the Latvian Health and Social Care Workers' Trade Union on the LTV programme "Forbidden Technique. Responsibility of the Servants of the People". The programme makers had interviewed a trade union representative but had not included the interview in the programme. The Ethics Board explained that it is not possible to ensure that all the views and arguments expressed by all the parties involved are listed or presented at the same time in any programme or other media material. The programme makers should, in accordance with the principle of editorial independence of the medium, ensure a multifaceted portrayal of events, but not necessarily a complete inversion of all the arguments expressed. The Ethics Board did not find that the programme did not represent a view on the need to implement the original Parliamentary decision on the pay rise, but concluded that the orientation of the programme focused more on the political aspects of the issue. Thus, the Ethics Board did not find that the direct exclusion of the trade union representative's interview from the programme had any negative consequences for the diversity of views in the programme in question. The Ethics Board is satisfied that the views of the trade union were, in the view of the programme makers, taken into account to the extent necessary in the preparation of the programme.
- In its Opinion No 6/2021, the Ethics Board, in the context of the company's complaint that the publication of the magazine "Ir" had selectively used the answers provided by the company and not in full, agreed with the media outlet that the journalist has a duty to reflect the essence of the information received and to highlight the most important points, rather than to insert the answers received word-for-word in the publication.
- In its Opinion No 4/2021, the Ethics Board, having examined the company's complaint about an article in the magazine "Likums un Taisnība" and on the website "Kas Jauns", concluded that the views of both sides had been heard in the drafting of the article, which was also reflected in the article, which comprehensively dealt with the conflict situation that arose. The Ethics Board stressed that it is not possible to provide a complete account and analysis of all the points made by the parties to a conflict in media publications. Media publications should include the views and arguments of the parties

to the extent necessary to ensure the most objective and multifaceted coverage of the event.

- In its Opinion No 4/2020, the Ethics Board examined a complaint that the portal "tvnet.lv" had refused to publish the opinion of the affected party after publication without explanation, thus violating the public's right to receive diverse information. The Ethics Board explained that the principle of diversity does not require the inclusion of all opinions. The inclusion of an opinion depends on both the format of the media material commented on and the content of the commentary. At the same time, the Ethics Board drew attention to the fact that, in accordance with the principle of respect enshrined in Article 4.7 of the Code of Ethics, the media should pay special attention to the interaction with the parties covered by the media material. If several parties are involved in a story or publication, it is likely that they may also wish to express their own, possibly divergent, views. Even if the media were not to publish the opinion expressed, the commentator should, as far as possible, obtain the media's assessment of the reasons for not reporting the opinion or comment.

Privacy

The concept of privacy is broad and can include a person's right to privacy, inviolability of private property, protection of correspondence and personal data, etc. Several opinions of the Ethics Board show that in certain situations the public interest justifies the use of journalistic techniques that would not be permissible in other situations, including the violation of privacy.

Address of the tragedy made public

- In 2020, in a letter to the Ombudsman, the Ethics Board issued an opinion on a media piece in which journalists had revealed a specific property and its address while reporting on an earlier tragic event. The Ethics Board took the view that there was no need for the media to show the real estate in question and, in particular, to disclose its address. This was all the more unnecessary in view of the fact that the property had changed hands. The benefit to the public of identifying the property in question, particularly in the period following the tragic event, does not outweigh the harm caused to the current owners, that is to say, the public interest in the location of the event in question at the time of the dissemination of the information is not so significant as to cause harm to the current owner of the property.

Secret filming in a kindergarten

- In its Opinion No 17/2020, the Ethics Board assessed the covert filming of the Latvian Television programme "Forbidden Technique" in a kindergarten and the screening of excerpts of the filmed material in the programme. The Ethics Board found no violation because, although the filming was not coordinated, the faces of both teachers and children were covered in the covertly filmed footage, thus ensuring a reasonable balance between the right to privacy (including protection of personal data) and the right to freedom of expression and information.

Publication of correspondence and conversations

- In its Opinion No 2/2021, the Ethics Board examined a complaint that the TV3 programme "Bez Tabu" contained biased information and violated the complainant's right to privacy. The complainant stated that the story published private correspondence without her consent, that the journalist did not inform her that the telephone conversation was being recorded and that she was not given time to prepare for the interview. The complainant did not consent to the use of the recorded conversation in the preparation of the story, and the written explanation she sent was not reflected in the story. The complainant's name, place of work and position were mentioned in the story, which she did not consider necessary in the public interest. The Ethics Board concluded that the story was made on an issue of public importance and portrayed a disparaging and nihilistic attitude towards public health and the restrictions and precautions imposed to contain the Covid-19 pandemic. The Ethics Board considers that the media has a duty to report on issues and events of particular public importance, including the Covid-19 pandemic, which is directly linked to public health risks and is therefore of concern and interest to a very wide public. In the view of the Ethics Board, it could not be concluded that the production of the story referred to in the complaint violated the Code of Ethics, since it is important to show the various prejudices prevailing in society about the seriousness of the disease and its possible impact on the health of any person. Although Article 7(3) of the Law on the Press and Other Mass Media prohibits the publication of correspondence of individuals without their consent, the Ethics Board considers that the public has the right to be fully informed about situations dangerous to public safety. In the view of the Ethics Board, in the situation in question, the benefit to the public of the information contained in the story outweighed the potential harm to the person concerned. At the same time, the Ethics Board stressed that the use of correspondence in the story in question proved the truthfulness of the statements made therein, however, in general, the publication of correspondence should be allowed only in case of extreme necessity, as the publication of correspondence of individuals may cause significant damage to the interests of private persons.

Trespassing on private property

- In its Opinion No 10/2023, the Ethics Board examined a complaint that journalists had entered the owner's rural property and filmed without contacting him. The journalists apologised and explained that they had not done so for malicious purposes, but only to document an important industrial heritage, and that they had looked up the telephone number of the current owner of the historic station building and called it several times over several days, but had never been able to reach the owner. There were also no signs at the property indicating where the private property begins or prohibiting going any further. They filmed only for documentation purposes and stayed on the side of the facade of the former station building, touching nothing and going nowhere else. Having heard the explanations, the Ethics Board found no violation of the Code of Ethics in the programme and asked the complainant to accept the journalists' apology.

Information about intimate relationships

- In its Opinion No 1/2021, the Ethics Board examined a complaint by a man that the media had reported on his former relationship with another man. The Ethics Board concluded that the media had ascertained that the other person had already disclosed information about his relationship with the complainant, including by explaining it in his book. The Ethics Board found no breach of the Code of Ethics in the publications and explained that the media had a duty to present truthful and complete information, verifying as far as possible that the information published was factual.

Use of personal social media posts

The Ethics Board has dealt with several complaints where people have complained, among other things, that the media outlet has included in publications information they have publicly shared on social media, including comments added by others to their posts, without their consent.

The situations and motivations of people sharing information publicly can vary widely, but the Ethics Board believes that the media have a right to use public information. Therefore, when posting information on social networking sites, especially as public information, people need to be aware that they will not be able to choose how it is disseminated, interpreted and whether or not it goes to the media, is copied, retold, etc. The media may have different reasons for using

news, for example it may be of public interest, the source of the information is already perceived as a public figure with much narrower boundaries of privacy.

The Ethics Board recommends that media outlets that use information published by people on social networking sites take care of the quality of their publications and the value added by the media to their content, for example by checking facts, clarifying information, gathering additional information. Although in many cases the media rely on the veracity of information once published elsewhere and do not contact the sources, the information does not always prove to be true. Even in situations where information of interest to the media is made public on social media by the victim of a crime, greater sensitivity on the part of journalists and contact with the victim helps to build a respectful relationship between sources and the media, promotes trust in the media and helps them to better fulfil their functions.

- Such situations are addressed in the Ethics Board's Opinions 5/2024 and 4/2024.

Victims and witnesses of crime

Disclosing information about victims of crime involves a number of aspects, including the protection of personal data, the principle of dignity, the public interest and the dissemination of information.

- In 2023, in its reply to the Ombudsman on possible violations of media ethics in connection with the publication of the name of the murdered woman and her minor son on the news portal "nra.lv", the Ethics Board acknowledged that in journalism it is permissible in situations where it is in the public interest to disclose information that is also subject to restrictions on disclosure, however, when reviewing the publication in question, some members of the Ethics Board considered that there was no need to mention the name of the child in the publication or to include a reference to the child being the eldest child. Such a necessity also does not follow from the purpose of the article. The media could have provided the information describing the killer by minimising the information disclosed about the child and by exercising the higher degree of caution required in situations where information about children and minors is obtained, processed and disseminated. There is a possibility that the disclosure of additional information about a child may place additional psychological strain on the child. Other members of the Ethics Board pointed out that the publication used the child's name by accurately quoting from the murdered woman's archived notes, in which she described in detail the actions of her persecutor. The adverse consequences for the individual - a minor child - of the publication of the article were considered unlikely, some members pointed out, stressing that the child's name, as well as other circumstances of the tragedy that the State had failed to prevent, were most likely known in detail in the local community. Although personal data were revealed in the publication, quoting lawyers, the Ethics Board considered that the journalist had the right to make editorial corrections and to minimise the information in order to protect

personal data. In this case, no minimisation of information was carried out. However, on the basis of the fact that the media outlet quickly deleted the information about the child from the publication, the Ethics Board concluded that the media outlet was aware that the name of the child mentioned in the publication could be interpreted as a violation of the right to privacy (protection of personal data) and had remedied it itself in accordance with the requirements of Article 6.2 of the Code of Ethics.

- In its Opinion No 3/2024, the Ethics Board examined a complaint about a publication in the magazine "Privātā Dzīve", which reported that while on holiday in an Indian resort, a Latvian choreographer was unplannedly approached and engaged as an actor in a local film - the film was about the murder of a Latvian woman who was killed in the resort a few years ago. The complaint alleged that the publication contained detailed and sensationalised information about the event on which the film was based, that the murdered woman was named and that, in the family's view, the details of the crime and the naming of the murdered person were both an affront to the memory of the deceased and a painful reminder to the family and friends of the brutality of the murder. The Ethics Board concluded that, in informing readers about the choreographer's involvement in the film and its making, the magazine had provided very minimal information about the crime itself, while the attitude of the author of the article and the interviewee towards the murder victim had been respectful and condemnatory of the crime. Considering the breadth and detail of the coverage of the crime a few years ago, the Ethics Board did not find any breach of the Code of Ethics in the publication. At the same time, the Ethics Board considered that in such situations, the media should carefully assess, in the course of the production of material, the relevance for the purpose of the publication of including private information about the victims of the crime, such as their names, despite the fact that this information was public. In the absence of a specific need for such information, it is advisable to avoid re-publicising it, as such reminders may cause pain to the victim's relatives, as well as embarrassment, as it may give an indication to someone unaware and lead them to speculate about the connection of relatives and siblings to the tragic crime.
- In its Opinion No 3/2023, the Ethics Board assessed the TV3 programme "Bez Tabu"'s story on youth violence at school. A parent of a student contacted the Ethics Board, claiming that the story caused emotional harm to an eyewitness, that the journalists had not verified the information, that the story was insufficiently objective, that caution in dealing with minors and confidentiality were not respected. The Ethics Board concluded that the story was about violence among young people at school as a problem and that the journalists considered the topic important enough for society to make a story about it. In the production of the story, the journalists sought the views of officials and experts, respected the privacy of the parties involved and used a staged version of the conflict to illustrate it rather than the original video of the event that was available to the journalists. The journalists have also worked correctly and with respect for children in the production of the story. The Ethics Board concluded that the producers of the programme had not breached the Code of Ethics.



Kultūras ministrija

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