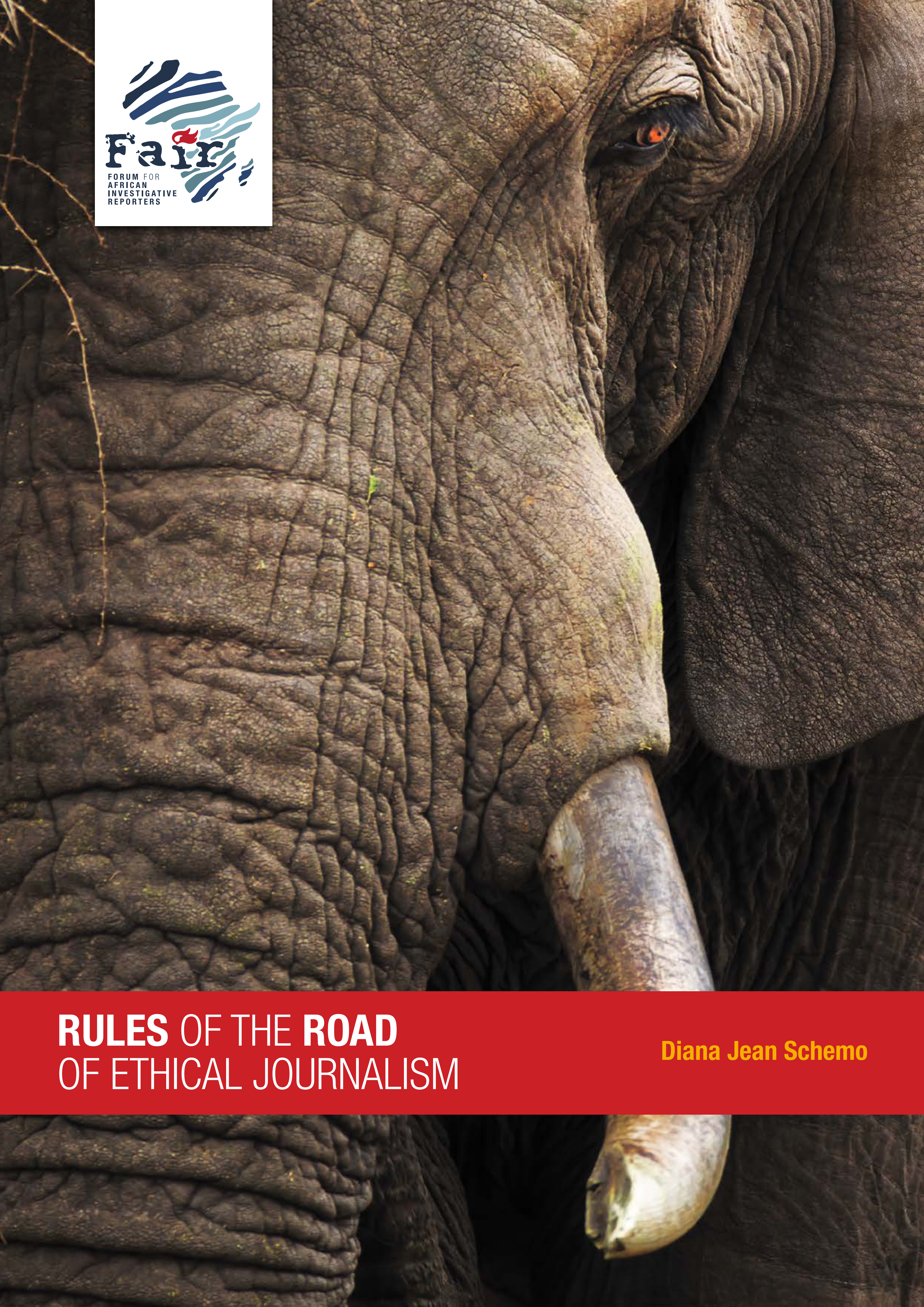

FAIR
FORUM FOR AFRICAN INVESTIGATIVE REPORTERS

RULES OF THE **ROAD** OF ETHICAL JOURNALISM

Diana Jean Schemo

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PREAMBLE

Democracy and the rule of law depend on a free and independent press that can help citizens hold public officials and institutions in check. Central to this essential role is trust that journalists and news organizations tell the truth fairly and impartially, and that they adhere to the highest standards of ethics and independence.

HONESTY AND FAIRNESS

Ethical reporters and editors must strive to tell the truth with courage, fairness and balance, open to the possibility that their reporting may lead to a story that varies with their initial concept.

They do not give pre-eminence to the government or official version of events, but give voice to the voiceless, seeking out unofficial sources and people on the ground.

They offer all parties to a conflict or dispute the chance to have their say and present their views fairly and objectively, and they do not skew comments to advance a particular point of view or agenda.

They should not withhold relevant information in order to bolster or undermine a given point of view. They should not doctor photos or documents to distort their meaning.

Ethical reporters and editors make every effort to give those named in stories the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing, and they report the results of those efforts within their news stories.

They credit other publications and writers as appropriate, and never plagiarize.

Where information is obtained through social media, they acknowledge its use and strive to insure the authenticity of sources and information obtained.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Journalists should avoid, wherever possible, perceived or actual conflicts of interest. They should not join advocacy or other organizations whose stances could compromise the journalist's independence.

Ethical reporters and editors are not for sale. They do not accept bribes, tips, advantages or gifts from sources or subjects of stories.

They strive to get information without paying sources.

Insight: In my book, it's okay to provide a meal and drinks while you're interviewing someone. Reporters do that all the time. But cash and gifts present a problem. Remember what happened with the reporters who wanted to interview Somali pirates, and ended up hoodwinked in Kenya? When is it okay to give gifts and such? I guess when the quality of information is no longer an issue.

After weeks of covering the Kurdish refugee crisis in Turkey after the first Gulf War, I couldn't handle the suffering of the people and started buying things they needed, like soap and such, and gave my winter coat to a woman who was cold. But these were people I'd already interviewed, and the gifts were given without any expectation of further information on my part.

Ethical news organizations provide their employees with a living wage, and do not count on reporters accepting meals, tips or gifts from those they cover. They do not require reporters to sell advertisements, a practice that compromises the reporter's role as an impartial investigator seeking truth in the public interest.

Journalists should not report on stories in which they have a stake, whether organizational or financial. If a reporter is wearing another hat, it should be disclosed to readers, Ideally, people with double affiliations should avoid writing about issues where they've taken a stand that could influence their objectivity in approaching a given subject or story. So somebody who is paid by, say, Greenpeace, should avoid reporting on environmental issues, but could write about unrelated stories. Where that's not possible, the publication must at the very least disclose the dual affiliation to readers. This does two things: it offers some protection against the target of a story exposing the tie and portraying the reporter as an advocate in impartial clothing, and it gives readers the information they need to judge the story's credibility, for better or worse.

To the greatest extent possible, reporters must disclose to the public the sources of their information, so consumers of news can assess its reliability and veracity. They should disclose any relevant ties and/or financial interests of sources to the subject of the story, which could influence a reader's assessment of the information provided.

THE CREDIBLE SOURCE

A few things are obvious. If a source has lied or withheld relevant information in the past, they're high risk. If they've got a criminal background, caution is called for. Reporters should go over information provided many times and ask sources the same questions in different ways, listening for contradictions in the story.

Beyond this, it's largely situational, as there are few hard and fast rules. If a reporter is trading in confidential or anonymous information, he or she should know the source very well: know their full name, where they work and live, who else they know and may have worked with, and what their motive is in sharing the information.

If a source can't explain how they came by documents and/or information that should also raise questions. Likewise, if they wouldn't ordinarily have access to the information or documents they share, the reporter should be extra careful to authenticate same. Reporters and editors should ask themselves whether the source has anything to gain by lying or putting forth false documents, and seek other avenues (people, courts, FOIA) if possible, to authenticate information.

PROTECTING SOURCES

In exceptional instances, journalists will have to work with sources whose identity cannot be publicly disclosed, either for their safety or their livelihood, or as a condition of receiving information. In seeking sources of information, particularly among those who have not worked with journalists, reporters must explain clearly any risks to the source's security and safety.

Agreements about confidentiality should be negotiated in advance of interviews, and the terms defined for maximum clarity. (Speaking on "background" generally signifies that a reporter may use information, but not divulge its source. "Off the record" means the information is for the journalist's private knowledge, and may not be shared.)

Where sources agree to be described but not identified by name, those descriptions should be agreed upon at the outset. The terms for use of documents, whether originals or copies, should also be agreed at the earliest possible stage. And reporters may never violate these agreements without the express permission of their sources.

The use of anonymous sources places an extra burden on the reporter to independently corroborate the information provided and the authenticity of documents and other evidence received.

Sources who speak on a confidential basis are placing the utmost trust in a journalist, and their identities must be protected, unless doing so would result in the commission of a crime, injury or death. If there are limits on what a journalist is willing to do to protect a source (e.g., going to prison), the reporter should disclose these to a source at the outset, or avoid working with confidential sources.

Similarly, if a reporter is required to divulge the source's identity to an editor, the reporter must notify the source of that fact before receiving information. In communicating with an editor, the reporter must take every precaution to protect the source's identity, particularly where conversations are vulnerable to hacking, eavesdropping or other forms of surveillance.

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