

Ethical guidelines for editing audio

Rules compiled by Mary McGuire, Associate Professor of Journalism, Carleton University

When editing interviews....

The most important rule - NEVER change the meaning of what the interviewee said.

* It's okay, even expected, that you will cut out ums, ers, long pauses, and other examples of verbal stalling - unless their verbal stalling is key part of the story, as in the case of a politician ducking tough questions.

* It's okay, even recommended, that you will cut out extraneous words.

Before editing: "I think that, you know, that, the university should lower tuition fees."

After editing: "The university should lower tuition fees."

* It's okay to cut out reiterations, if you can do it skillfully enough to avoid a jumpy cut that sounds either unnatural or like an obvious, audible edit.

Before editing: "The students in the new program -- the students -- their families, and their teachers will welcome this change."

After editing: "The students in the new program, their families, and their teachers will welcome this change."

* It's okay to cut out subordinate clauses, especially to make a clip shorter, as long as it doesn't change the meaning of what they say.

Before editing: "The police arrested a man, I could see it from across the street, who was carrying a large green knapsack on his back."

After editing: For example: "The police arrested a man who was carrying a large green knapsack on his back."

* In other words, it's okay to make edits that help someone sound sharper, tighter, clearer. It's just NEVER okay to change the meaning of what they said.

* It's also okay to use excerpts or clips from an interview in a different order in your story than they appeared in the original interview. Similarly, it's okay to ask someone to identify themselves at the end of the interview, and use that at the beginning of the interview on the air.

* When using the interview, or excerpts from it, on the air, or on the web, always identify the speaker somewhere. No-name clips should generally be avoided.

When conducting interviews for editing later ...

* It's not okay to tell someone what to say. It is okay to re-ask or, better still, rephrase a question to allow someone another chance to collect his or her thoughts and answer it again. Often, they are clearer and more succinct the second time around.

* If you want to use the interview, or excerpts from it, on the air, you must get the permission of the interviewee, in most jurisdictions. Find out what the rules are in your state or province.

* It is not okay for you, as the interviewer, to record different questions and dub them in or substitute them for the ones you asked during the interview. Sometimes recording what are called "re-asks" is required, as in television, when an interview is shot using only one camera and the questions are recorded again afterwards, but the same questions must be used. In radio, re-asks should almost always be avoided, except in those rare instances when the interviewer literally chokes asking a question or there is a technical glitch that makes the question inaudible. But in each case, you must ask the same question posed initially and take great care to match the ambient sound. Mismatched background ambience will make it sound like a doctored interview.

When recording and using actuality sound in audio reports...

The most important rule - NEVER use sound you did not record yourself at the scene or while doing your research. In news, it is not okay to use canned sound effects, sound beds from previous files, or fabricated sound.

For example, if you interview a carpenter but fail to record the sound of him at work in his workshop, you can't just record yourself using a hammer at home later and pretend, in your report, that it is the sound of the carpenter at work.

or

If you cover an outdoor protest where demonstrators are singing John Lennon's Imagine, but a windy day created some mike noise, you cannot just substitute the sound from another demonstration the previous week where different protestors sang the same song.

You can't do either of these things and honour the first principle of journalism - accuracy.

Unfortunately for those of us steeped in news traditions, the rules about using fabricated or canned sound are increasingly broken by people who produce public affairs or documentary radio programming and believe production values are as important as journalistic values. They justify it by saying background sound beds and key sounds make stories stronger and more interesting for the listener and sometimes the reporter fails to get those sounds in the field, so they must be added later. They believe that if the added sounds don't change the essence of the story, it's okay.

But when radio producers add or fabricate sounds, they are, in some ways, deceiving listeners. They are doing much the same thing as newspaper photographers or editors using Photoshop to doctor photos to make crowds look bigger, criminals look more sinister or to erase body parts from train tracks after explosions. When news organizations have been caught doing those things in the past they have apologized because they know it hurts their credibility, undermines their commitment to accuracy and breaks trust with their readers. Using fake sound in radio may be harder to detect, but it is the equivalent of manipulating photos.

A variety of professional organizations take the same view.

The Radio and Television News Directors Association Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct includes the following:

Professional electronic journalists should pursue truth aggressively and present the news accurately, in context, and as completely as possible... Professional electronic journalists should not:

- * Manipulate images or sounds in any way that is misleading.
- * Present images or sounds that are reenacted without informing the public.

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Guide to Journalistic Standards and Practices says, in part...

Special effects, including sound effects, should be used with particular care in the presentation of journalistic material. On the rare occasions when they are used, rigorous judgment must be applied to ensure that they do not distort reality or have the effect of producing editorial comment.

Accuracy and integrity can be compromised by abuse of the technology of radio and television, which offers a wide variety of visual and sound effects, to modify what is being broadcast.