



## Church vs. State: A Worksheet

**church vs. state:** *A term used to describe what used to be a hard separation between editorial (church) and the business/advertising side of media companies (state). The idea was to prevent advertisers and sponsors from influencing news content (see why things can go wrong in this case study of [Bloomberg News in China](#) by the Columbia Journalism Review). The line between church and state has blurred in recent years as companies look for ways to diversify their revenue, including asking traditional editorial staffers to help design or participate in creating [sponsored content](#).*

Sometimes you may be asked to work on a story or assignment that may give you pause because you're not sure where it falls in terms of church vs. state. To help you think about this in pragmatic terms, this worksheet contains nine real-world examples of situations you may face in your role as a reporter or editor.

Here's your assignment: Read through each scenario and think about how you would handle the situation. Understanding how the media company you work for does business — specifically, how it's funded (makes money) — should help you understand why an ask is being made of you.

In some scenarios, it may be perfectly fine to work on behalf of the “state” even though you consider yourself a member of team “church.” In other situations, you may find that you're uncomfortable participating.

The point of this worksheet is to get you thinking before you're asked to participate in a situation you may find tricky.

After you're done thinking through each scenario, go to the end to find some advice and suggestions we've compiled for you. In some cases, there may not be an easy answer, which is why it's important to have a conversation about this with your team leader.

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**CHURCH vs. STATE: REAL WORLD SCENARIOS**

**1. A Sponsor Wants a “Friendly” Story**

*Scenario:* A major advertiser sponsors a news or editorial event and asks your editor whether you can “find a positive angle” about the advertiser’s new product launch.

**2. An Editor Pressures You to Delay a Negative Story About an Advertiser**

*Scenario:* You’ve discovered a safety issue involving a company that buys a lot of ads, and an editor suggests “holding the story for a bit.”

**3. The Business Side Requests “Insight” Into Your Sources**

*Scenario:* An ad sales or partnerships leader asks for background on an industry you cover — specifically, they’d like to know who your contacts are.

**4. You’re Asked to Appear at an Advertiser’s Event as a “Thought Leader”**

*Scenario:* A sponsor wants you onstage for a panel, either as the moderator or as a panelist. The sponsor is a subject of your coverage.

**5. Metrics Pressure: The Audience Growth and Social Teams Suggest a More “Clickable” Headline**

*Scenario:* Audience development proposes changing your headline in a way that might distort or overstate the story.

**6. Your Investigation Triggers a Subscriber and/or Advertiser Backlash**

*Scenario:* After publishing a tough accountability story, the subscription team reports that churn (see Glossary) has spiked and wants to “consider story mix” going forward.

**7. Branded Content Team Wants Access to Your Notes and Names of Your Interview Subjects**

*Scenario:* The sponsored-content (or “studio”) team wants details from your ongoing reporting to help them craft custom content for a client in the same industry. The team also would like to talk to those you have interviewed for the story.

**CHURCH vs. STATE: What Should You Say?**

**1. A Sponsor Wants a “Friendly” Story**

*Scenario:* A major advertiser sponsors a news or editorial event and asks your editor whether you can “find a positive angle” about their new product launch.

How to handle: A few ideas...

- Politely explain that editorial decisions are made independently of sponsorships.
- Offer to evaluate the newsworthiness of the topic, just as you would any other news pitch.
- If it’s newsworthy, proceed with standard reporting: include context, data, criticism and competitors. Don’t forget your nut graph.
- If it’s not newsworthy, decline. Explain why as you would for any other story and point them to paid content or branded content teams.
- Remember that advertisers routinely underwrite coverage in exchange for acknowledgement. (Example: This podcast/article/video series is being brought to you by Company X). But having them endorse coverage in the form of ad spends doesn’t mean they have story approval – and it definitely doesn’t guarantee that only positive stories will be written about them.

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## 2. An Editor Pressures You to Delay a Negative Story About an Advertiser

*Scenario:* You’ve discovered a safety or other troubling issue involving a company that buys a lot of ads, and an editor suggests “holding the story for a bit.”

How to handle: A few ideas ...

- Ask for editorial reasoning, not business reasoning (“Is there a sourcing or verification concern” with my reporting?)
- Document all your reporting steps and decisions in emails or notes.
- Suggest a meeting with the organization’s standards chief or the top editor to ensure a proper process is being followed.
- Continue reporting so the story meets all editorial and sourcing standards when it runs.

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## 3. The Business Side Requests “Insight” Into Your Sources

*Scenario:* An ad sales or partnerships leader asks for background on an industry you cover — specifically, they’d like to know who your contacts are.

How to handle: A few ideas ...

- Always decline to share sources or any unpublished reporting. The team will know from your published content who you routinely talk to since those sources will be quoted or mentioned in your stories already.
- Offer instead to share public information, previously published coverage or general industry context that doesn’t compromise confidentiality. It’s not uncommon for reporters to provide in-house briefings on their beats (again, using public information) to help bring others on your teams up to speed, especially when it comes to new areas of coverage.
- Remind them (gently and politely) that reporters can’t provide market intelligence, including any confidential information you might be privy to, like embargoed news or events, for sales prospects.

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## 4. You’re Asked to Appear at an Advertiser’s Event as a “Thought Leader”

*Scenario:* A sponsor wants you onstage for a panel, either as the moderator or as a panelist. They’re a subject of your coverage.

How to handle: A few ideas ...

- Check newsroom guidelines on outside participation. Reporters are frequently invited to appear at industry conferences and events and share their reporting. Of course, this depends on the purpose of the event and who else will be appearing on stage. *Note: Journalists typically will not be paid to appear at industry events because this is usually seen as part of their job duties. If compensation, travel expenses or other swag are offered, abide by your newsroom’s gift and travel policies.*
- If you feel uncomfortable with the request, tell your editor and suggest that another editorial staffer not assigned to that beat instead represent the newsroom at the event.
- If participation is allowed and you’re comfortable with the format, topic and participants, set clear boundaries:
  - No endorsement of the company or disparagement of its competitors. Stick to whatever knowledge you have based on reporting and cite that in your remarks.
  - No prior script approval, including letting its people know you will not be telling them in advance how you will answer certain questions.
- Keep your role journalistic: ask questions; don’t pitch the sponsor’s products.

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**5. Metrics Pressure: Audience Growth and Social Teams Suggest a More “Clickable” Headline**

*Scenario:* Audience development and/or social teams propose changing your headline in a way that might distort or overstate the story.

How to handle: A few ideas ...

Collaborate with them. Nearly all headlines can be improved. Your role is to guard against distortions and guard the accuracy of what the story is about (so that you avoid having your story become clickbait).

- Explain why certain wording misleads and instead offer accurate, engaging alternatives.
- Loop in your editor so they know what’s going on and can help handle if there’s disagreement.
- Use analytics to inform — not dictate — journalistic judgment. Just because people like to click on headlines containing certain words or phrases doesn’t mean that option is the best way to present your story.

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**6. Your Investigation Triggers a Subscriber and/or Advertiser Backlash**

*Scenario:* After publishing a tough accountability story, the subscription team reports that churn has spiked and they now want to “consider story mix” going forward.

How to handle: A few ideas ...

- Remember that not everyone will like everything you write. Reaffirm that journalism isn’t a customer-satisfaction product. Reporting is about delivering fact-based stories on topics that matter to readers. If deemed necessary, the news organization can issue a statement that says, “We stand by our reporting.”
- Acknowledge the business impact, but emphasize your role: fairness, accuracy, public-interest work and original reporting that relies on reputable sources.
- Suggest that leadership handle the conversation between business and editorial, but that your reporting continues without influence.
- Note: Changes can be made to any story in the form of corrections. If you’ve made a factual error, fix it and acknowledge the mistake promptly. But changing stories after bowing to pressure from people/groups who don’t like the angle you’ve chosen or how the reporting highlights situations they don’t want highlighted is problematic because you and the newsroom are sending a message that you’re willing to cave over criticism.

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**7. Branded Content Team Wants Access to Your Reporting Notes and Names of Your Interview Subjects**

*Scenario:* The sponsored content (or “studio”) team wants details from your ongoing reporting to help them craft custom content for a client in the same industry. The team would also like to talk to those you have interviewed for the story.

How to handle: A few ideas ...

- Decline clearly and kindly: Editorial reporting can’t be used to assist commercial storytelling. Their writers should do their own research and reporting, including interviewing subjects who are aware that the story is being sponsored by an advertiser.
- Point them to published reporting only if they’re looking for background information or suggestions on topics that have been covered and resonate with readers.
- Ask your editor to reinforce boundaries: separate workflows, no shared drafts, no shared notes.
- Maintain the line between reporting and marketing production.

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**SUPPORTING PRESENTATIONS**

- The Business of Journalism ... and You
- The Business of Journalism: Beyond Writing and Reporting

**SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS**

- The Business of Journalism: A Glossary