

Inaugural ethics report

March 2021

A message from the CEO



Robert Elliot, Founder and CEO

Zinc Network helps its clients achieve meaningful, measurable change across some of the most challenging social issues facing the world today.

Since founding our company in 2012 we've taken seriously the need to act transparently and with integrity. Given the tricky nature of some of our work, it's impossible to get things right every time, yet we're committed to building a business that balances not just profitability with purpose, but also ensuring the policy objectives behind our projects meaningfully support the communities associated with our work.

“As a B-Corp we're committed to balancing both profitability with purpose, and ensuring the objectives behind our projects meaningfully support the communities we work with”

In November 2020 our commitment to ethics, and the tangible steps we've taken to operating responsibly, were recognised by us being awarded B-Corp status. B-Corp is a network of over 3700 organisations who've legally committed themselves to put staff, customers, communities and the environment at the heart of corporate decision making. We're super proud to be accepted into this esteemed club – after a lengthy application and validation process – which includes The Guardian, Innocent (smoothies) and Ben and Jerry's to name a few.

We are building an ethics board that will grow as we scale-up. In time the board will grow to three independent ethicists who will each have access to all our company data and it's their job to check the way we operate meets the standards set out in our ethics code of conduct as summarised later in this document. For now, we've one board member, Thomas Kent, who is the former president and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and is currently an associate professor of international and public affairs at Columbia University. This report includes his initial findings from 2020. Every year, we'll publish further reports.

2020 Ethics Report

At the request of Zinc Network, I served as the company's ethics consultant in 2020.

Early in the year, I assisted in the preparation of a company-wide statement of ethical principles. I then assessed the company's compliance with these principles in audits at the end of the second, third and fourth quarters. I joined all staff including senior management in conducting wide-ranging ethics discussions in January and December 2020. Other work included discussions with senior management around individual ethical issues as they arose.

The ethics statement was based on draft language put together by Zinc Network's management team. It was edited by me, along with other senior Zinc managers, to conform to general principles of ethical business and to reflect the complex demands of the work Zinc does. The statement addresses Zinc's public activity in support of its projects, its approach to research, and its responsibility to its employees. It is published on the company's website.

Ahead of each of my quarterly audits, Zinc provided me a list



Thomas Kent, Ethicist

of current projects, from which I selected the projects I wished to review. Zinc provided me with detailed project descriptions and risk registers and arranged video conferences for me with the Zinc team leading the projects I selected. The conversations were normally an hour. I then shared my observations and recommendations with the Senior Management Team.

In the course of 2020, I reviewed 12 projects, some more than once as work on them advanced. Throughout my work, project leaders and the Senior Management Team discussed the projects with me in detail and fully answered my questions. When I

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requested additional information and documents, they were readily supplied. In reviewing projects, I sometimes identified potential ethics risks that were missing from the projects' risk registers. These issues were listed for attention by the project teams.

I encountered no activities inconsistent with Zinc's public commitment to working only on causes that advance democracy, free speech and the safety of vulnerable people. On one occasion, I consulted with Zinc's leadership on a proposal from a national government that was seeking open-source research into disinformation within its borders and elsewhere in its region. Although the research brief proposed to Zinc was of a routine type, we decided to turn down the project. We felt that because the country of interest – while being a democracy in some respects – did not rank favourably in the media freedom index, meaning Zinc's research could be distorted by the authorities and turned against pro-democracy actors.

Zinc Network works on many sensitive social problems, including child sexual abuse, disinformation, extremism, and young people who despair about their futures. Inevitably, dealing with such challenges raises ethical questions. Zinc employees must conduct research on social problems while protecting the personal privacy of the people

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its employees survey and encounter online. Zinc employees must oppose hate rhetoric while defending free speech overall. They must campaign against violence while recognising the oppression that sometimes leads to it. Zinc programs also seek to encourage hope and progress in environments where people are often marginalised and ignored. While Zinc's projects will often include these types of conflicts, I find Zinc's staff to be cognisant of these tensions and their approach in line with the company's ethical principles. Where complications arise the Senior Management Team are responsive in finding solutions.

Many of the issues I discussed with Zinc staff involved the transparency of Zinc's work. Zinc's non-profit and government clients sometimes require confidentiality around individual projects. However, Zinc lists its clients on its public website and identifies the media campaigns its employees conduct as Zinc products. Zinc's principles call for the company's media and campaign partners to work with the maximum transparency possible. However this isn't always possible, especially when working in violent and conflict settings.

I found Zinc employees attentive to the stress and physical danger that its partners can face in turbulent

countries. Zinc has defended the editorial independence of its partners, including from clients and donors who sometimes try to involve themselves unduly in media content. Zinc has also successfully resisted pressure to make the tone of advertising campaigns more assertive or argumentative than it feels appropriate and ethically acceptable.

The company is strongly committed to the welfare of its employees. In the course of research, employees may be exposed to content that is hateful or obscene. Employees may also be affected by meetings with people who recount traumatic experiences. Zinc provides psychological support to employees facing potential trauma.

My assessment of Zinc's research work finds that the company takes appropriate care for the welfare of interview subjects, particularly children. On one occasion I encountered, research subjects were not selected from a sufficiently diverse background to assure the success of the project; this was recognised and addressed. The company also guards from disclosure of personally identifiable information collected in the course of its research.

Zinc has a strong ethics code, but it sometimes works in consortiums involving multiple sponsors and

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international partners. Unless Zinc is the lead partner, it cannot control the actions of others, who may not have their own ethics codes that align with Zinc's. Zinc must always convey its ethical principles in detail to its partners and clients. Since Zinc works with reputable organisations, there are good opportunities to adopt common ethical principles and learn from each other's experience.

Zinc's senior management believes ethics should be a concern of all staff members. The CEO led the two ethics workshops that I participated in, and the entire staff was invited. The workshops were not simply declarations of principles; each involved detailed discussions of recent ethics issues that staff members had faced. The conversations were open in tone, in which staffers were encouraged to discuss the pros and cons of different ethical approaches. Staff also raised additional ethical issues that had been on the agenda, and these were openly discussed.

Zinc, like any company in its sector, continues to face a difficult operational and ethical landscape. Some issues remain to be resolved, but my work this year found the company genuinely concerned about navigating ethical issues with commitment and concern.

Our core ethical principles



Respecting privacy when researching human behaviour

- We respect the agency of those taking part in our research programmes, with participants fully briefed on a project's objectives and able to disengage at any stage
- We respect people's right to privacy when we conduct open-source digital research and only report personally identifiable content in specific circumstances: i.e. if there is a threat to the user, or the public's safety

Supporting everyone working with us

- We respect the agency of individuals, organisations, partners and staff working with us, and fully brief everyone on a project's objectives
- We aim to support everyone working on our projects and manage risks accordingly; for example, support coping with tackling the issue of online child abuse



Building a network with integrity and acting transparently

- We work only with clients and partners who want to deal with problems effectively and do not contradict the core values of democracy and free speech
- When creating or co-creating content, we enforce strict accuracy guidelines

