

Zinc Network Ethics Report

May 2022

Corporate integrity in turbulent times



Margherita Watt, Executive Director

Zinc Network is dedicated to delivering meaningful measurable change for our clients and partners in a way which is as ethical and transparent as possible.

The challenges we address have evolved in line with world events: the global rise of extremism, COVID related disinformation, the emergence of online child sexual grooming, and now the invasion of Ukraine. Such rapidly changing situations demand that we continually scrutinize how we deliver the most impactful work whilst remaining alive to the associated

“As we ask our teams to pivot and adapt to support the Ukrainian people and push back against the disinformation of the war on Ukraine, we bring a committed and heightened focus to the ethical aspects of our work.”

ethical considerations. As a B-Corp, we are committed to tackling this tension head-on, engaging the whole Zinc Network team in our mission to balance profitability, purpose and meaningful change in the communities our projects serve.

In 2021/22 the global pandemic refocused our business and how we deliver our work. The war in Ukraine brought with it unique ethical considerations, posing a new set of questions: How do our systems and processes adapt to delivering programmatic interventions in a climate of war? How do we create





interventions without compromising the security and safety of Zinc staff and clients? How do we create behaviour change communications that undermine hostile state efforts while ensuring our commitment to transparency?

Since the invasion of Ukraine, the level of scrutiny on our business practices and output has intensified. Delivering meaningful, measurable change while doing the right thing has never required greater corporate focus. To help meet this challenge we have stepped up our work with Ethicist Thomas Kent (former ethics editor of The Associated Press and Associate Professor of international and public affairs at Columbia University). We have also increased the depth and

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frequency of our internal discussions, engagement with staff, and risk assessments to ensure robust ethical decision making throughout the business. We are striving to facilitate a culture where staff feel empowered and encouraged to engage in company-wide ethical discussions and to escalate any concerns they may have regarding the way we work.

To create an optimal integrity environment, we facilitate bi-annual all company ethics workshops, we consult every month on ethical matters and produce an annual report sharing the findings of Thomas Kent. This is the report from 2021 and we commit to publishing further reports each year.

2021 Ethics Report

I serve as Zinc Network's ethics consultant. In 2021 I carried out three regular reviews of Zinc activities from an ethics standpoint, and continue to consult as needed on other ethics matters as they arise.

Zinc continues to work in a challenging environment. The company is dedicated to advancing free speech, democracy and non-discrimination – values it considers fundamental. Unfortunately, corrupt and repressive actors see such values as a threat. They combat them with government repression, disinformation and even physical violence. I have worked with Zinc's management to assess projects from the standpoint of ethics, effectiveness and safety.

We have sought to balance considerations of impact and transparency with the possible dangers that staff, clients and partners may face from hostile actors because of their work. Many people working in turbulent parts of the world are passionate about working for the causes we believe in: democracy, free media, and freedom from discrimination and corruption.



Thomas Kent, Ethicist

We respect their agency in deciding to undertake work that may be hazardous, and do everything possible to help them work safely.

We also respect the creative independence of our partners. We work to improve their skills and impact, and oversee the overall strategy of their campaigns, but we recognize they must speak authentically and in their own voice.

In conversations with clients, we have emphasized the importance of operating with transparency and authenticity, and allowing our partners to work with editorial independence. We accept no

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work that makes us feel ethically uncomfortable.

My 2021 reviews covered four projects in February, four in May and five in September. Zinc provided me, ahead of each review, a list of current projects from which I selected those I would audit. Zinc provided me with detailed project descriptions and risk registers, and arranged video conferences for me with the teams running the projects. The conversations ranged from 30 minutes to more than an hour. I shared my observations and recommendations with the Senior Management Team.

In the course of these reviews, I began to see several issues that repeated themselves from project to project. Most involved matters that were not addressed in the ethics code we created in 2020, or areas where the code was not clear. I came to London in November 2021 for two days of meetings with Zinc’s senior managers to expand and clarify the code. Such updates are routine with large companies’ codes and should be conducted regularly.

As a result of the November meetings, we agreed to make several changes to the code. Among other things, we clarified our rules for research using focus groups, as opposed to research via large-scale surveys; stated that those we work with must genuinely support our core values of democracy,

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free speech and tolerance; stated that focus groups we conduct should reflect the full diversity of the populations we plan to address; confirmed that our research work should collect only verifiable, publicly available information; and better defined the transparency rules for content we create.

I also reviewed Zinc’s editorial guidelines from the standpoint of ethics. There had been no complaints about editorial ethics violations, but we made changes to expand the guidelines to cover more issues commonly found in the ethics codes of major journalistic organizations. We underlined the importance of using first-hand, legitimate sources; emphasized that imagery we use must not mislead our audience in any way; updated our rules on privacy; and added material on safeguarding the welfare of children whom Zinc employees interact with.



One project I reviewed was Zinc's behaviour change campaign for UK-based NGO the Internet Watch Foundation, seeking to tackle the increasing issue of online child sexual grooming. This area of work included creating a hard hitting short dramatised film, warning how children are being sexually groomed online. Zinc did an exemplary job of taking care of a child who appeared in this campaign. Zinc also took measures to protect focus group members interviewed for a campaign about violence against women.

I have recommended that the editorial guidelines be included in contracts with our partners, so they are fully aware of our expectations.

Zinc managers and I agreed that the company should create training materials to make sure all staff members completely understand our ethics and editorial guidelines. These materials could include online quizzes, training sessions, or a redesign for greater impact of the ethics documents we currently give our staff.

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The research department has agreed that our research rules should be clear to outside partners who contribute research to Zinc.

As I stated last year, Zinc continues to demonstrate a high regard for ethics. Issues I raise receive attention at senior levels. This year, at my initiative, Zinc raised some ethical questions with the lead contractor on a project in which Zinc had a role. The lead contractor was understanding, and the issues raised appear to be on the way to resolution. In April 2021 and January 2022 Zinc held all-staff ethics conferences in which I participated, another sign of the company's commitment to ethics.

Zinc staff has been highly cooperative with my ethics reviews of projects, readily providing documents and explanations whenever needed. Some issues remain to be resolved, but my work this year found the company genuinely concerned about navigating ethical issues with commitment and concern.

