



# The Sift<sup>®</sup> News Goggles

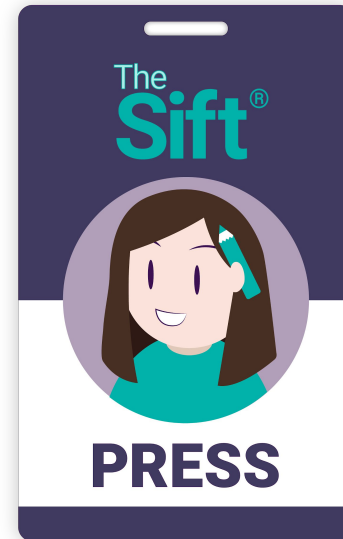
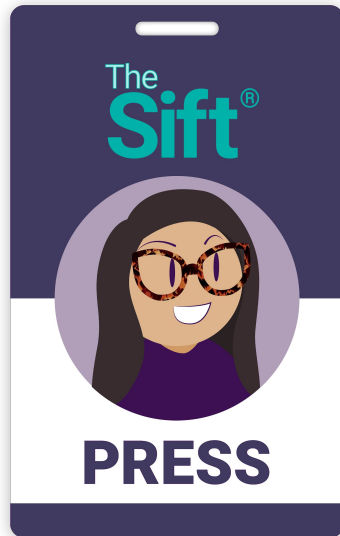
Conflicts of interest in news reports

March 8, 2021

# First things first

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- Be sure to view these slides in presentation mode.
- [Suzannah](#) and [Hannah](#), former reporters who work at NLP, are going to help you examine this topic through journalists' eyes.



A foundational principle of quality journalism is to avoid conflicts of interest – or even the appearance of such conflicts. A conflict of interest is anything that could impact the fairness, accuracy or independence of work produced by a journalist or news organization. Failing to disclose such conflicts, be transparent about them and factor them into news decisions can erode public trust and damage a news organization’s credibility.



This week, let's turn our attention to this key journalism standard by analyzing a [March 2 news report](#) from the Democrat and Chronicle in Rochester, New York, on the controversy over CNN host Chris Cuomo's coverage of his brother, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo. Grab your news goggles. Let's go!



# Democrat and Chronicle

# Democrat & Chronicle

Here's the story!

## Why Chris Cuomo says he can't cover his NY governor brother Andrew on CNN amid scandals

**Joseph Spector** New York State Team

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### Chris Cuomo appears on Gov. Cuomo coronavirus briefing

CNN anchor Chris Cuomo made a surprise appearance on his brother, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo's briefing on the coronavirus. *USA TODAY*


Let's take a closer look at this case of conflict of interest — and revisit some concepts from previous News Goggles.

**ALBANY** - The fun television times are over for the Cuomo brothers.

After having months of back-and-forth banter on Chris Cuomo's CNN show that mixed serious discussions about the COVID pandemic with jabs at who their mother loves more, the younger brother on Monday night said he is unable to discuss the governor's political struggles.



Ever notice the name of a city in all capital letters at the beginning of a story? This is called a "dateline" and indicates that the story was covered by a reporter with feet on the ground there. This story was reported from Albany, New York's capital city.




Review time! This story quickly pivots to what newsrooms call the "nut graf." It conveys, in a nutshell, what the story is about and provides context. This nut graf shows the crux of the debate: While Chris Cuomo of CNN has interviewed his brother in the past about the pandemic, he recently said "he is unable to discuss the governor's political struggles." Let's see why this scenario is a conflict of interest ...

"Obviously I am aware of what is going on with my brother. And obviously I cannot cover it because he is my brother," Chris Cuomo said at the top of his 9 p.m. show *Prime Time*.

"Now, of course CNN has to cover it. They have covered it extensively and they will continue to do so."

He said he cares "profoundly" about the issues brought up by the women who have accused his brother of sexual harassment, which have upended the governor's third term and put his political future in peril.



Here we go! The explanation jumps out in the lead quote (a topic covered in our Feb. 22 News Goggles). Chris Cuomo said he cannot cover the governor's recent "political struggles" because "he is my brother." Their relationship represents a conflict. As a journalist, I was never in a similar position but knew I could not interview family members or friends for a story.



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Here's a concept from the Nov. 23 News Goggles. The underlined words are a hyperlink. If you click on the underlined area, it should take you to another webpage — either on the same website or another website — that provides related supporting information about the words that are underlined. Clicking on “upended the governor’s third term,” leads to a Democrat and Chronicle story on the governor’s nursing home controversy and sexual harassment allegations.




Andrew Cuomo, 63, and Chris, 50, were a regular hit on his show: The governor would talk about New York's response to the pandemic and rail against the Trump administration for its handling of it.

There were swipes at each other, a schtick among two brothers. Chris once showed a huge cotton swab, joking that is what is needed to get up his brother's nose for a COVID test.




I wonder what this “schtick” looked like on air? How did their relationship affect Chris Cuomo’s coverage of his older brother?



The brothers were transparent about their relationship on air. They joked with one another, Chris Cuomo replied “with an eyeroll” and Andrew Cuomo said, “Mom told me I had to” appear on his younger brother’s show.

He also once joked about his older brother showing a softer side during the early months of the pandemic.

"I've seen you referred to a little bit recently as the 'love gov' and I'm wondering if that's bleeding into your demeanor at all and making you a little soft on the president," the CNN anchor said April 8. 

The governor responded with a wide smile.

"I've always been a soft guy. I am the love gov. I'm a cool dude in a loose mood, you know that. I just say, 'Let it go, just go with the flow, baby.' You know. You can't control anything, so don't even try."

With an eyeroll, Chris responded: "You have never said any of those things."

In another, Chris thanked him for being on the show. Andrew responded: "Mom told me I had to."

Since Chris joined the network in 2013, CNN had prevented him from doing stories about his brother to avoid a conflict.

But Andrew Cuomo would occasionally come on *New Day*, the CNN show that Chris initially co-hosted.

And that too was a running gag: The governor knew his brother couldn't ask him questions due to the company policy, so Andrew would rib in, leaving Chris with little opportunity to respond.

As Suzannah mentioned, the Cuomos did not hide their relationship, so the issue is not that CNN failed to disclose that the two were brothers. The concern in this case is more about news decisions than transparency. Should Chris Cuomo interview Andrew Cuomo at all? Is it appropriate? That question lies at the heart of this debate.

Conflicts of interest can also involve favors or gifts from sources. As a reporter, I followed strict rules related to money. For example, during interviews at coffee shops, I made a point to buy my own food or drink, which is typical newsroom protocol. News organizations try to avoid any undue influence (or its appearance) in coverage.



On the primetime show, Chris Cuomo would question his brother about decisions during the pandemic, but also offered effusive praise of his brother's handling of the pandemic when the governor was viewed as a national star for his daily briefings.

“Me having you on the show is an unusual thing. We’ve never really done it. But this was an unusual time,” Chris Cuomo said on one episode in June.

“I’m wowed by what you did. And, more importantly, I’m wowed by how you did it.”

The Democratic governor has not been on his brother's show in months, particularly in recent months as he has faced criticism for undercounting COVID deaths in nursing homes.

There are some exceptions. Chris Cuomo acknowledged it was unusual to have his governor brother on his show. In scenarios like Hannah’s coffee shop example, it could get awkward if a source insisted on paying. Anticipating exchanges like this, one of my previous newsrooms said it was OK to accept items of \$5 or less. Sometimes, I would accept the cup of coffee and arrange to buy the source coffee next time.





In a statement last month to The Washington Post, CNN said it had the governor on the show because "the early months of the pandemic crisis were an extraordinary time," so it made an exception to its rule.

"We felt that Chris speaking with his brother about the challenges of what millions of American families were struggling with was of significant human interest," the statement continued.

Here's another previous News Goggles concept! The Democrat and Chronicle "picked up" this statement from The Washington Post. Remember, journalists sometimes "pick up" information or reporting from another news organization as a way to quickly get pertinent details to readers. By citing the Post, the newsroom is being transparent about where this information came from.

This statement provides CNN's explanation of why they made an exception: the "extraordinary time" of COVID-19. Do you agree with CNN's decision?



But the station added the "rule remains in place today. CNN has covered the news surrounding Governor Cuomo extensively."

The Post's media columnist Erik Wemple wrote Feb.16 that the statement demonstrates the problem CNN had: "You can't nullify a rule when your star anchor's brother is flying high, only to invoke it during times of scandal. You just can't."

Includes reporting by The Associated Press.

But CNN emphasized that while there are rules preventing Chris Cuomo's coverage, the news channel has still "extensively" covered the issues related to the governor.

The next graf (journalist-speak for "paragraph") highlights a criticism of CNN's decisions: "You can't nullify a rule when your star anchor's brother is flying high, only to invoke it during times of scandal," wrote Erik Wemple, the Post's media critic.

One more News Goggles throwback! Do you remember wire services? News organizations sometimes rely on reporting from bigger outlets with a broader reach, including wire services, such as The Associated Press (AP) and Reuters. This line at the bottom of the story, "Includes reporting by The Associated Press," credits AP for providing some of the information in the report. It is another sign of transparency.



**Note:** New York Times opinion columnist David Brooks has also recently faced scrutiny following a [BuzzFeed News report](#) about his failure to disclose to readers relevant funding ties to a project he founded outside the newsroom and has written about in his columns. The Times [reported](#) on March 6 that disclosures detailing Brooks' affiliation with the initiative and his resignation from this outside paid position will be added to [columns](#) that reference the project.





# News Goggles: Next steps

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## Related:

- [“Opinion: CNN’s Chris Cuomo is reminding us why conflicts of interest poison the news”](#) (Erik Wemple, The Washington Post).
- [“Oh, So Now Chris Cuomo Can’t Cover His Brother For CNN”](#) (Charlotte Klein, Vanity Fair).
- [“David Brooks of New York Times criticized for undisclosed financial ties to project he praised”](#) (Paul Farhi, The Washington Post).

**Discuss:** Why do standards-based newsrooms take conflicts of interest seriously? What are some possible conflicts of interest newsrooms and journalists face? How should news organizations handle potential conflicts of interest?



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This exercise originated in the March 8, 2021, issue of The Sift® newsletter from the News Literacy Project. You can read archives of the newsletter and subscribe [here](#).



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