



The Sift[®] News Goggles

The New York Times editor's note

Oct. 5, 2020

First things first

- Be sure to view these slides in presentation mode.
- Download our full annotations in [Microsoft Word](#) or as a [PDF](#).
- [Suzannah](#) and [Hannah](#), former reporters who work at NLP, are going to help you examine this topic through journalists' eyes.



This week, we're going to examine an editor's note published online on Sept. 27 that accompanied an ongoing New York Times investigation into President Donald Trump's taxes and finances.



Here it is!

An Editor's Note on the Trump Tax Investigation

The New York Times has examined decades of President Trump's financial records, assembling the most comprehensive picture yet of his business dealings.



What's an editor's
note?

An Editor's Note on the Trump Tax Investigation

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Longer notes like this one almost feel like they are pulling back the curtain on a news organization's approach to a big project. Based on the type of series involved in this note, I am hoping to find added context, clarity and background. Let's see!





Hmm, who is Dean Baquet? Why would this note come from him?



By Dean Baquet

Published Sept. 27, 2020 Updated Sept. 30, 2020

Editor's notes can give newsroom leaders a chance to address readers directly in a way that reporters often cannot in news coverage. While news reports largely focus on what happened, notes like this one can provide a place for editors to explain why an article matters and to clarify a news organization's reasons for pursuing a story in the first place.



Sources

A team of New York Times reporters has pored over this information to assemble the most comprehensive picture of the president's finances and business dealings to date, and we will continue our reporting and publish additional articles about our findings in the weeks ahead. We are not making the records themselves public because we do not want to jeopardize our sources, who have taken enormous personal risks to help inform the public.



News organizations generally have strict policies related to the use of unnamed or anonymous sources. Even though such sources may be unnamed in a story, they are known to the journalist(s) who received and vetted their information and who confirmed their credibility.

Watchdog reporting

Mr. Trump, one of the wealthiest presidents in the nation's history, has broken with that practice. As a candidate and as president, Mr. Trump has said he wanted to make his tax returns public, but he has never done so. In fact, he has fought relentlessly to hide them from public view and has falsely asserted that he could not release them because he was being audited by the Internal Revenue Service. More recently, Mr. Trump and the Justice Department have fought subpoenas from congressional and New York State investigators seeking his taxes and other financial records.



This graf (journalist-speak for “paragraph”) explains that the president has not released his tax returns unlike previous presidents, and has fought to prevent the records from becoming public. With its reporting of these records, the Times is practicing watchdog reporting, or holding people in power to account.

The First Amendment

Some will raise questions about publishing the president's personal tax information. But the Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that the First Amendment allows the press to publish newsworthy information that was legally obtained by reporters even when those in power fight to keep it hidden. That powerful principle of the First Amendment applies here.



It seems like the Times is expecting criticism about its decision to publish this tax information. Here, Baquet explains why the Times has the right to publish this report — its work is protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which protects the freedom of the press, among other freedoms.

News Goggles: Next steps

Discuss: Do you agree with the Times' decision to publish the "president's personal tax information"? Was it ethical for the Times to do so? Why does Baquet refer to the First Amendment in his editor's note? What other rights are protected under the First Amendment?

Resources: ["Democracy's Watchdog"](#) and ["The First Amendment"](#) (NLP's Checkology® virtual classroom).

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This exercise originated in the Oct. 5, 2020, issue of The Sift® newsletter from the News Literacy Project. You can read archives of the newsletter and subscribe [here](#).



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