# Internet Character Reporting

## Style and Libel Guide

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**This document is under construction** This document describes the manner in which information must be listed in the [Area 51 Directory of Ufologists](#). These rules can also be applied to other lists of people on the World Wide Web. Webmasters in other fields are welcome to link to this document and use it for their own personality databases, as long as this document itself is not copied. Suggestions for improving this document are encouraged.

For general page style rules, see our [main style guide](#). For categories used for UFO character reporting, see our [character template](#) | [annotated](#).

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# Introduction

### 1.1 Definition

**Internet Character Reporting** is defined as the attempt to collection information on prominent individuals and their work in a certain specific field. The goal is to collect not only the facts of the activities and claims but also information that might reflect on the credibility of their statements--including their personality, track record and relationships with other members of the field. This is especially important in the fringe sciences, like ufology and psychic phenomena, where often the only evidence we have for an event is the word of the person who claims to have experienced it.

### 1.2 General Philosophy

Internet character reporting (ICR) is a form of disciplined journalism and is subject to the same general rules of proof and rebuttal that apply to other forms of news media. In general, sources must be cited for any information that is not a matter of public record, and a reply must be sought from affected parties for any information that might be considered controversial. As with other news media, the internet wields a lot of power, and it can attract lawsuits when one person feels they have been unfairly maligned. One of the reasons for having clear rules and standards for such reporting is to prevent libel lawsuits, but the purpose runs deeper than that: Reporting must be fundamentally fair to all parties and relevant to the topic at hand. No information should be withheld from the reader that might help him make an informed decision about the subject.

### 1.3 ICR Compared to Newspapers

ICR follows the same general rules of newspaper reporting, as defined in the *AP Style Guide* and other journalism style guides:

- The editorial tone must be neutral.

- The language must be specific and non-emotional.

- Clear distinction must be drawn between on-the-record facts and unproven claims.

- Claims, accounts and opinions of involved parties must be clearly attributed and separated from the editorial narrative. (e.g. Using quotes and clear attribution for unproven statements.)

For example, it would be inappropriate for a newspaper to say:

> The defendant beat his wife with a stick.

Instead, the newspaper must attribute such an inflammatory statement to the person who said it, without the newspaper taking a stand.

> Prosecutor Smith contended that the defendant beat his wife with a stick. Defense attorney Rogers countered that no such beating took place and that the defendant was being prosecuted only for his political opinions.

There are always two sides to every story in which a person's credibility, freedom or ego are at risk. Usually one position is the truth and the other a lie, but it is not the job of the reporter to decide between them. The reporter is obligated to present both sides, even if one of the sides seems ridiculous.

The essence of the reporter's craft is not in making judgments but in collecting statements and fair, factual information that might be used in the judgment of others. Whenever a specific claim is made, the reporter can ferret out factual information that might confirm or refute it, then present that information alongside the original claim, but it is not the reporter's role to make a value judgment about the information.

However, ICR differs from newspapers in several respects....

- A newspaper forms a permanent record that cannot be changed, while any record on the World Wide Web can be changed at any time.

- A newspaper article tends to be lost and forgotten with time, while a WWW record is always instantly available.

- A newspaper is severely limited in space and cannot print lengthy documents, while there is no practical limit on the length of documents on the web. Information on the web may still be condensed and summarized in index pages, but the web can also provide access to a source document in its entirety for those who choose to view it.

- ICR pages are generally created by volunteers on a shoestring budget, without the funding and resources available to newspapers. This generally limits the amount of active research that can be done.

What this boils down to is that ICR pages are always "works in progress" and are generally more passive than newspaper reporting. If a document becomes publicly available on the internet, it can immediately be linked to an ICR index page, usually without the need to actively seek a reply of any affected parties. In this case, responsibility for the accuracy of the document is seen to lie with the person who originally posted it, and the ICR page provides access to this document without warrantee. However, any affected party has the right to reply to this information in writing, and the ICR page sponsor is obligated by fairness to provide this reply alongside the original claim (with certain limitations on resources).

When the ICR author is not publishing a document but is merely providing a link to an already published one, the libel risk and responsibility for fairness are low. The risks and responsibilities increase when the author summarizes these documents or draws attention to certain parts of them.

## 1.4 Scope of Responsibility

The primary medium of internet character reporting is an index page for each individual, as described in this template.

Reporting can also be conveyed in text articles, similar to newspaper articles, reporting in detail on a specific event or topic. The ICR author is responsible only for the articles that he produces, as long as other articles are clearly attributed

to their source.

## 1.5 General Rules of Fairness

1.  The author or organization responsible for any ICR page must be clearly specified, along with addresses for reply both by email and regular mail.

2.  The page author must respond to complaints from affected parties, modifying the page in question or providing links to their replies where appropriate. (The extent of this obligation still needs to be defined.)

3.  Documents and index pages under the responsibility of the ICR author should be stored at a single location under the author's control, with notice given that the page should not be copied. This assures that the author can change the page immediately if there is a complaint and that he is not responsible for any other unauthorized copies.

4.  Neutral and specific wording.

5.  All facts which are not part of the public record must included their source.

6.  All claims must be attributed to the person who made them.

7.  Opinions by the editor must be clearly labeled as such.

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## 2.1 Style and Storage Rules

These style and storage rules apply to index pages for each subject.

1.  Each index page obeys the General Rules of Style.

2.  The main page for each subject obeys the character template | annotated.

3.  **File Name**: The file name for the main page for each subject is index.html. When referred to in other pages, only directory name is used, not index.html, which is assumed.

4.  **Directories**. Within each subject's subdirectory, these subdirectories can be created when needed.

    - **/corr/** -- Used for email and other written correspondence to and from the subject.

    - **/articles/** -- Used for articles in published periodicals which have a specific date. Stored in form "publication_950731.txt" or "publication_950731.html". In this environment, there should be no subdirectories inside this one, since the number of files is expected to be limited.

    - **/works/** -- Used for non-dated or non published works by the author.

    - **/credentials/** -- If a person's credentials, such as education, become a issue of contention, this directory contains documentation on these credentials and attempts to verify.

    - **/pix/** -- Used for photos and graphics relating to subject, which cannot be properly filed elsewhere.

    - **Other subdirectories** can be created for each organization or publication the subject owns or sponsors.

## 2.2 WWW Publishing of Internet Messages

These rules concern the linking of internet material to our pages and the storage of these items on our server.

1.  **Newsgroup Postings**. All newsgroup postings are treated as public information and are assumed to be the

responsibility of the person making the post. Unless it is copyrighted, we may copy any newsgroup posting and store it on our server without permission of anyone. (We may also store certain copyrighted newsgroup items on our server, reviewed on a case-by-case basis for "fair use.")

2. **WWW and FTP files**. We may link to any existing file on the Web or an FTP server without permission or notice to the owner. As long as we do not attempt to copy these files to our own server, we are not responsible for the permissions, ethics or copyright compliance of the existing file.

3. **Private Email**. The publication of private email on the web is a sensitive issue. Normally, we will publish private email or excerpts of private email only if one of the following conditions is met:

   - The author has given us permission to publish the message or permission is clearly implied in the message itself.

   - The message is apparently innocuous or routine, presenting no obvious threat to the author, AND we have made a reasonable effort to notify the author that we intend to publish the message.

   - The email message, when addressed to us, clearly exceeds the bounds of normal courtesy (a "flame"). No permission is required here.

   - The email message has already been published in a public forum, like a newsgroup. If any permission is required, the responsibility for obtaining it lies with the person who posted it to the newgroup.

   - Someone else with legitimate access to the message (like the person who to whom it was addressed) provides the server storage and has taken responsibility for the posting of this message to the web. If any permission is required, the responsibility for obtaining it lies with the person who posted it to the web. For example, we can publish flames that were received directly by us, but we cannot publish the flames received by others; only the recipient can do this. We may link to this existing web page if the subject bears a legitimate relevence to the topic at hand.

   In short, authors of courteous private email can be assured that their messages to us will normally be held in confidence and will not be published without permission or reasonable notice.

   - **Names on Private Email**. When permission is requested or notice given to the author of a private email message (consistant with the first two sub-items above), the author may request that his name, email address or other specific information be removed to protect his privacy. Normally, such requests will be honored (but need not be in the case of flames or third party postings).

## 2.3 Examples

For examples of ICR index pages, see: Beckjord and Stranges (Random ufologist pages that happen to be up to date. Others will be added later.)

## To be continued later...

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