

Journalism Ethics Script

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The word “ethics” comes from a Greek term describing “moral character.”

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When we talk about ethics we are not just talking about questions of right and wrong, but how we decide what is right and wrong when faced with an ethical dilemma.

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Ethics involves determining what people or organizations should do in a given circumstance, or what participants involved in a particular activity or profession ought to do.

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There are several journalism organizations that have developed codes of ethics. Groups such as the American Society of News Editors, Society of Professional Journalists, the Radio Television Digital News Association, and the National Scholastic Press Association offer guidelines on how journalists should conduct themselves. You can read these codes in detail in our “additional resources” section – and learn how to develop your own personal code or one for your newsroom.

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It is important to distinguish between ethics and law. The two are clearly related, because laws do not emerge out of nowhere but from reflection over what is right and wrong, and then writing that into law.

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However, the fundamental difference between ethics and law is that law prescribes minimal standards of conduct. In other words, it provides a “baseline” or “floor,” so to speak, informing you of what you must or must not do in order to avoid getting into trouble.

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Ethics, on the other hand, prescribes maximal standards of conduct, the things we *ought* to do.

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Think of it this way: If you ask somebody why they did something, and they say “I did it because I could,” you will probably not be impressed by their explanation of their conduct. Furthermore, you still don’t really know why they did it: What were their motivations? What were they trying to achieve? Ethics replaces the language of “can” with the language of “should.”

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From a journalistic perspective, this moves us away from a purely legal discussion of what we can do to an ethical discussion of what we should do. This means that while journalists must always treasure and defend their legal rights, they should never forget their ethical responsibilities.

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We face ethical questions every day, whether we recognize them or not. Some of these can seem trivial, but are ethical questions nonetheless.

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If a friend has a new outfit that you think makes them look terrible, but you don't want to hurt their feelings, you are experiencing an ethical dilemma: Do you tell the truth or not?

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A *true* ethical dilemma occurs when there are two or more courses of action that are ethically justifiable. This is why true ethical dilemmas are difficult – because ethics is not about obvious answers.

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In journalism, there are plenty of such ethical dilemmas. For example:

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Journalists value privacy but may, under certain circumstances, need to invade somebody's privacy to get a story that could do the general public a lot of good.

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Journalists value transparency and honesty but may, under certain circumstances, grant a source anonymity.

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In both these cases, we have compelling arguments on both sides, that need to be considered carefully in light of the circumstances. Ethics is concerned with *how* you determine what is right and wrong, based on the information available, and what course of action you pursue as a result.

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Over centuries, philosophers have developed a number of approaches to ethics.

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Some of them say that the most important thing in ethical decision-making is outcomes – the good that is generated as a result of a particular course of action.

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Others say that the most important thing is rigid adherence to rules.

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Another group says that the most important thing is moderation – of finding a middle path between two extremes.

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All of these perspectives are valuable, but I want to focus on a particular perspective, which is based on the notion of *duty*.

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Duty-based questions focus on what our responsibilities are because of the particular role that we occupy. This makes it easily applicable to journalism, which plays a key role in a democracy.

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Here is a 9-step guide for decision-making, developed by the media ethicist Christopher Meyers.

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Step 1: Start with an open mind. You need to give the available options a fair hearing.

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Step 2: Gather *all* the facts. Who, what, where, when, why, and how? What's the context? What are the issues involved?

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Step 3: Check your gut. Do you have a nagging feeling about what the right or wrong thing to do is?

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To quote the great philosopher Spider-Man, is your “spider-sense tingling”? Don't be driven solely by your gut feeling, but realize it may be trying to tell you something.

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Step 4: Reflect on your duties. The philosopher W. D. Ross lists a number of duties that we ought to uphold, simply as members of the human race. They are:

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Respect for others...

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Avoiding harm to others...

Slide 32:

Repairing harm done to others...

Slide 33:
Keeping promises...

Slide 34:
Justice, which he defines as ensuring people receive what they have earned...

Slide 35:
Beneficence, which means improving the lives of others...

Slide 36:
Showing gratitude...

Slide 37:
Helping the least advantaged...

Slide 38:
Honesty...

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...and self-improvement.

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These are easily applicable to journalism. Journalists do not set out to harm people, for example. They apply the duty of justice by ensuring that the political system is fair and uncorrupted. They apply the duty of honesty by ensuring their reporting is accurate and verifiable. And so on. As you are confronted with an ethical dilemma, you should ask yourself what are the *relevant* duties involved in this case?

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Step 5: Become more specific to identify the nature of the conflict. What duties are in conflict? How are they in conflict?

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Step 6: Work through the various views and arguments, being sure to avoid bias and self-interest. What are the merits for each course of action?

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Step 7: Seek consensus. Talk to others about it. Get the perspective of your colleagues.

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Step 8: Once the best choice is determined, follow that path but keep the avoidance or minimization of harm at the forefront of your mind.

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Step 9: Review the process and help develop newsroom policies accordingly, so that future journalists have the benefit of your insight.

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Here's a case we can apply this to. You are the editor of a major American newspaper. Two of your reporters have discovered damaging information about corruption at the highest levels of government.

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Their main source has so far provided consistently accurate and verifiable information. The reporters trust the source to provide further information. However, the source wishes to remain anonymous.

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A short while later, the source comes forward with compelling information that the President of the country himself is involved in political corruption.

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The question: Is protecting a source more important than revealing all the relevant information about a news story? Work your way through the Meyers process to determine what you would do.

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This is, you probably already know, a true case: Watergate. It is considered one of the most important instances of investigative journalism in American history.

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The investigation by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

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Woodward and Bernstein never revealed the identity of their source. Woodward and Bernstein's promise to protect their source's identity was supported by their editor, Ben Bradlee.

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The source, a high-ranking FBI official, revealed his own identity in 2005.

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Let's go back and review Meyers' decision-making process. Of course, it is important to begin the process with an open mind. It is important to base decisions on evidence and principles.

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What are the facts? There are a lot of people involved – the source, the journalists, the President, his administration, even the public. We need to consider the role each of these play in the story and its implications.

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After checking your gut...

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...you should reflect on your duties. Two certainly stand out: First, the duty of keeping promises. Granting anonymity to a source is a vow that should be made only in exceptional circumstances. Second, the duty of honesty. Journalists have a duty to readers to be honest and disclose information, not conceal it. The source is clearly a major stakeholder here: shouldn't the public be able to judge his trustworthiness for themselves? What if the source has an axe to grind?

Other duties may apply to the general case. Certainly some harm may be done as a result of this investigation, but so would some good. The duty of justice would suggest that journalists have a duty to pursue a story by whatever means necessary to eliminate corruption from the political system.

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But let's stick with the duties that are foremost in conflict: Keeping promises and being honest. This is the conflict that needs to be resolved.

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You should weigh up the arguments on both sides, again keeping in mind all of the facts and relevant parties.

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You should then look to your colleagues for advice – and we know from history that their editor was supportive of his reporters.

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You'll learn more about this case from my colleague, Mike Jenner, in our investigative reporting module. Ultimately, the Washington Post protected the source's identity. Harm was certainly done to President Nixon and his reputation, but this was, most would argue, proportionate to the good that was done for the country in bringing to light significant political corruption.

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What would you have done?

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