

Journalism ethics and standards

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Journalism ethics and standards comprise principles of ethics and of good practice as applicable to the specific challenges faced by journalists. Historically and currently, this subset of media ethics is widely known to journalists as their professional "code of ethics" or the "canons of journalism".^[1] The basic codes and canons commonly appear in statements drafted by both professional journalism associations and individual print, broadcast, and online news organizations.

“ Every news organization has only its credibility and reputation to rely on. ”

—Tony Burman, ex-editor-in-chief of CBC News, The Globe and Mail, October 2001^[2]

While various existing codes have some differences, most share common elements including the principles of — truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness and public accountability — as these apply to the acquisition of newsworthy information and its subsequent dissemination to the public.^{[3][4][5][6]}

Like many broader ethical systems, journalism ethics include the principle of "limitation of harm." This often involves the withholding of certain details from reports such as the names of minor children, crime victims' names or information not materially related to particular news reports release of which might, for example, harm someone's reputation.^{[7][8]}

Some journalistic Codes of Ethics, notably the European ones,^[9] also include a concern with discriminatory references in news based on race, religion, sexual orientation, and physical or mental disabilities.^{[10][11][12][13]} The European Council approved in 1993 Resolution 1003 on the Ethics of Journalism which recommends journalists to respect yet the presumption of innocence, in particular in cases that are still *sub judice*.^[14]

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Evolution and purpose of codes of journalism

The principles of Journalistic codes of ethics are designed as guides through numerous difficulties, such as conflicts of interest, to assist journalists in dealing with ethical dilemmas. The codes and canons provide journalists a framework for self-monitoring and self-correction.

Codes of practice

While journalists in the United States and European countries have led in formulation and adoption of these standards, such codes can be found in news reporting organizations in most countries with freedom of the press. The written codes and practical standards vary somewhat from country to country and organization to organization, but there is a substantial overlap among mainstream publications and societies. The International Federation of Journalists launched a global Ethical Journalism Initiative [2] (<http://www.ethicaljournalisminitiative.org>) in 2008 aimed at strengthening awareness of these issues within professional bodies.

One of the leading voices in the U.S. on the subject of Journalistic Standards and Ethics is the Society of Professional Journalists. The Preamble to its Code of Ethics states:

...public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility.

The Radio-Television News Directors Association, an organization exclusively centered on electronic journalism, maintains a code of ethics centering on—public trust, truthfulness, fairness, integrity, independence and accountability.^[15] RTDNA publishes a pocket guide to these standards.^[16]

Common elements

The primary themes common to most codes of journalistic standards and ethics are the following.

Accuracy and standards for factual reporting

- Reporters are expected to be as accurate as possible given the time allotted to story preparation and the space available, and to seek reliable sources.
- Events with a single eyewitness are reported with attribution. Events with two or more independent eyewitnesses may be reported as fact. Controversial facts are reported with attribution.
- Independent fact-checking by another employee of the publisher is desirable
- Corrections are published when errors are discovered
- Defendants at trial are treated only as having "allegedly" committed crimes, until conviction, when their crimes are generally reported as fact (unless, that is, there is serious controversy about wrongful conviction).
- Opinion surveys and statistical information deserve special treatment to communicate in precise terms any conclusions, to contextualize the results, and to specify accuracy, including estimated error and methodological criticism or flaws.

Slander and libel considerations

- Reporting the truth is almost never libel [3] (<http://www.mediacompolicy.org/2009/02/articles/journalism/truth-is-no-longer-absolute-libel-defense/>), which makes accuracy very important.
- Private persons have privacy rights that must be balanced against the public interest in reporting information about them. Public figures have fewer privacy rights in U.S. law, where reporters are immune from a civil case if they have reported without malice. In Canada, there is no such immunity; reports on public figures must be backed by facts.
- Publishers vigorously defend libel lawsuits filed against their reporters, usually covered by libel insurance.

Harm limitation principle

During the normal course of an assignment a reporter might go about—gathering facts and details, conducting interviews, doing research, background checks, taking photos, video taping, recording sound—harm limitation deals with the questions of whether everything learned should be reported and, if so, how. This principle of limitation means that some weight needs to be given to the negative consequences of full disclosure, creating a practical and ethical dilemma. The Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics offers the following advice, which is representative of the practical ideals of most professional journalists. Quoting directly:^[17]

- *Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.*
- *Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.*
- *Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.*
- *Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.*
- *Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.*
- *Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.*
- *Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.*
- *Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.*

Presentation

Main article: News style

Ethical standards should not be confused with common standards of quality of presentation, including:

- Correctly spoken or written language (often in a widely spoken and formal dialect, such as Standard English)
- Clarity
- Brevity (or depth, depending on the niche of the publisher)

Self-regulation

In addition to codes of ethics, many news organizations maintain an in-house Ombudsman whose role is, in part, to keep news organizations honest and accountable to the public. The ombudsman is intended to mediate in conflicts stemming from internal and or external pressures, to maintain accountability to the public for news reported, and to foster self-criticism and to encourage adherence to both codified and uncoded ethics and standards. This position may be the same or similar to the public editor, though public editors also act as a liaison with readers and do not generally become members of the Organisation of News Ombudsmen.

An alternative is a news council, an industry-wide self-regulation body, such as the Press Complaints Commission, set up by UK newspapers and magazines. Such a body is capable perhaps of applying fairly consistent standards, and of dealing with a higher volume of complaints, but may not escape criticisms of being toothless.

Ethics and standards in practice

Main articles: journalism scandals, media bias, media ethics, and yellow journalism

As with other ethical codes, there is a perennial concern that the standards of journalism are being ignored. One of the most controversial issues in modern reporting is media bias, especially on political issues, but also with regard to cultural and other issues. Sensationalism is also a common complaint. Minor factual errors are also extremely common, as almost anyone who is familiar with the subject of a particular report will quickly realize.

There are also some wider concerns, as the media continue to change, for example that the brevity of news reports and use of soundbites has reduced fidelity to the truth, and may contribute to a lack of needed context for public understanding. From

outside the profession, the rise of news management contributes to the real possibility that news media may be deliberately manipulated. Selective reporting (spiking, double standards) are very commonly alleged against newspapers, and by their nature are forms of bias not easy to establish, or guard against.

This section does not address specifics of such matters, but issues of practical compliance, as well as differences between professional journalists on principles.

Standards and reputation

Among the leading news organizations that voluntarily adopt and attempt to uphold the common standards of journalism ethics described herein, adherence and general quality varies considerably. The professionalism, reliability and public accountability of a news organization are three of its most valuable assets. An organization earns and maintains a strong reputation, in part, through a consistent implementation of ethical standards, which influence its position with the public and within the industry.

Genres and ethics

Advocacy journalists — a term of some debate even within the field of journalism — by definition tend to reject "objectivity", while at the same time maintaining many other common standards and ethics.

Creative nonfiction and Literary journalism use the power of language and literary devices more akin to fiction to bring insight and depth into often book-length treatment of the subjects about which they write. Such devices as dialogue, metaphor, digression and other such techniques offer the reader insights not usually found in standard news reportage. However, authors in this branch of journalism still maintain ethical criteria such as factual and historical accuracy as found in standard news reporting. Yet, with brilliant prose, they venture outside the boundaries of standard news reporting in offering richly detailed accounts. One widely regarded author in the genre is Joyce Carol Oates, as with her book on boxer Mike Tyson.

New Journalism and Gonzo journalism also reject some of the fundamental ethical traditions and will set aside the technical standards of journalistic prose in order to express themselves and reach a particular audience or market segment.

Tabloid journalists are often accused of sacrificing accuracy and the personal privacy of their subjects in order to boost sales. The 2011 News International phone hacking scandal is an example of this. Supermarket tabloids are often focused on entertainment rather than news. A few have "news" stories that are so outrageous that they are widely read for entertainment purposes, not for information. Some tabloids do purport to maintain common journalistic standards, but may fall far short in practice. Others make no such claims.

Some publications deliberately engage in satire, but give the publication the design elements of a newspaper, for example, *The Onion*, and it is not unheard of for other publications to offer the occasional, humorous articles appearing on April Fool's Day.

Relationship with freedom of the press

In countries without freedom of the press, the majority of people who report the news may not follow the above-described standards of journalism. Non-free media are often prohibited from criticizing the national government, and in many cases are required to distribute propaganda as if it were news. Various other forms of censorship may restrict reporting on issues the government deems sensitive.

Variations, violations, and controversies

There are a number of finer points of journalistic procedure that foster disagreements in principle and variation in practice among "mainstream" journalists in the free press. Laws concerning libel and slander vary from country to country, and local journalistic standards may be tailored to fit. For example, the United Kingdom has a broader definition of libel than does the United States.

Accuracy is important as a core value and to maintain credibility, but especially in broadcast media, audience share often gravitates toward outlets that are reporting new information first. Different organizations may balance speed and accuracy in different ways. The *New York Times*, for instance, tends to print longer, more detailed, less speculative, and more thoroughly

verified pieces a day or two later than many other newspapers.^[*citation needed*] 24-hour television news networks tend to place much more emphasis on getting the "scoop." Here, viewers may switch channels at a moment's notice; with fierce competition for ratings and a large amount of airtime to fill, fresh material is very valuable. Because of the fast turn-around, reporters for these networks may be under considerable time pressure, which reduces their ability to verify information.

Laws with regard to personal privacy, official secrets, and media disclosure of names and facts from criminal cases and civil lawsuits differ widely, and journalistic standards may vary accordingly. Different organizations may have different answers to questions about when it is journalistically acceptable to skirt, circumvent, or even break these regulations. Another example of differences surrounding harm reduction is the reporting of preliminary election results. In the United States, some news organizations feel that it is harmful to the democratic process to report exit poll results or preliminary returns while voting is still open. Such reports may influence people who vote later in the day, or who are in western time zones, in their decisions about how and whether or not to vote. There is also some concern that such preliminary results are often inaccurate and may be misleading to the public. Other outlets feel that this information is a vital part of the transparency of the election process, and see no harm (if not considerable benefit) in reporting it.

Taste, decency and acceptability

Audiences have different reactions to depictions of violence, nudity, coarse language, or to people in any other situation that is unacceptable to or stigmatized by the local culture or laws (such as the consumption of alcohol, homosexuality, illegal drug use, scatological images, etc.). Even with similar audiences, different organizations and even individual reporters have different standards and practices. These decisions often revolve around what facts are necessary for the audience to know.

When certain distasteful or shocking material is considered important to the story, there are a variety of common methods for mitigating negative audience reaction. Advance warning of explicit or disturbing material may allow listeners or readers to avoid content they would rather not be exposed to. Offensive words may be partially obscured or bleeped. Potentially offensive images may be blurred or narrowly cropped. Descriptions may be substituted for pictures; graphic detail might be omitted. Disturbing content might be moved from a cover to an inside page, or from daytime to late evening, when children are less likely to be watching.

There is often considerable controversy over these techniques, especially concern that obscuring or not reporting certain facts or details is self-censorship that compromises objectivity and fidelity to the truth, and which does not serve the public interest.

For example, images and graphic descriptions of war are often violent, bloody, shocking and profoundly tragic. This makes certain content disturbing to some audience members, but it is precisely these aspects of war that some consider to be the most important to convey. Some argue that "sanitizing" the depiction of war influences public opinion about the merits of continuing to fight, and about the policies or circumstances that precipitated the conflict. The amount of explicit violence and mutilation depicted in war coverage varies considerable from time to time, from organization to organization, and from country to country.

Reporters have also been accused of indecency in the process of collecting news, namely that they are overly intrusive in the name of journalistic insensitivity. War correspondent Edward Behr recounts the story of a reporter during the Congo Crisis who walked into a crowd of Belgian evacuees and shouted, "Anyone here been raped and speaks English?"^[18]

Campaigning in the media

Many print publications take advantage of their wide readership and print persuasive pieces in the form of unsigned editorials that represent the official position of the organization. Despite the ostensible separation between editorial writing and news gathering, this practice may cause some people to doubt the political objectivity of the publication's news reporting. (Though usually unsigned editorials are accompanied by a diversity of signed opinions from other perspectives.)

Other publications and many broadcast media only publish opinion pieces that are attributed to a particular individual (who may be an in-house analyst) or to an outside entity. One particularly controversial question is whether media organizations should endorse political candidates for office. Political endorsements create more opportunities to construe favoritism in reporting, and can create a perceived conflict of interest.

Investigative methods

Investigative journalism is largely an information-gathering exercise, looking for facts that are not easy to obtain by simple requests and searches, or are actively being concealed, suppressed or distorted. Where investigative work involves undercover journalism or use of whistleblowers, and even more if it resorts to covert methods more typical of private detectives or even spying, it brings a large extra burden on ethical standards.

Anonymous sources are double-edged - they often provide especially newsworthy information, such as classified or confidential information about current events, information about a previously unreported scandal, or the perspective of a particular group that may fear retribution for expressing certain opinions in the press. The downside is that the condition of anonymity may make it difficult or impossible for the reporter to verify the source's statements. Sometimes sources hide their identities from the public because their statements would otherwise quickly be discredited. Thus, statements attributed to anonymous sources may carry more weight with the public than they might if they were attributed. (See also: news source.)

The Washington press has been criticized in recent years for excessive use of anonymous sources, in particular to report information that is later revealed to be unreliable. The use of anonymous sources increased markedly in the period before the 2003 invasion of Iraq.^[*citation needed*]

Science issues

The mainstream press is often criticized for poor accuracy in reporting science news. Many reporters are not scientists, and are thus not familiar with the material they are summarizing. Technical information is also difficult to contextualize for lay audiences, and short-form reporting makes providing background, context, and clarification even harder. Food scares are an example of the need for responsible science journalism, as are stories connected with the safety of medical procedures.

Because science deals largely with accepted facts or scientific consensus, it can illuminate some of the common complaints leveled at journalistic standards and practices. For example, in the common tendency in the name of fairness, to seek out and equally report "both sides of the story," it would be ludicrous spending equal time reporting the "flat Earth" argument when ever a "spherical Earth" was assumed. Not so much, in say; society, culture, or politics, where it's easy for the apathetic or uninformed to pretend everything is "soft," mere, or unreal opinion. Likewise, the common practice to without discrimination, publish "Average Joe's" highly opinionated opinion on the cause of something, (such as a flood) simply because he's standing by the side of the flood observing it. But in fact the cause is probably technical, and may have great economic and political import, —as will the published article within the realm of public opinion. It is sometimes claimed that some publishers do not want expert reporters because they cannot-be/are-not objective in their reporting. Critics argue this definition of objective actually means "ignorant." In science, as noted above, where one opinion is NOT as good as any other as we pretend in politics and various other social arenas, this seems particularly silly. Science itself has rules (such as scientific consensus and peer review) so it is not uselessly chasing every low-merit hypothesis coming from countless megaphones. Some of these values are explained in Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and by Carl Popper, etc and are likely to be adopted by some science writers. For all these and related reasons, science reporting may be on some leading edges of journalism.

Examples of ethical dilemmas

One of the primary functions of journalism ethics is to aid journalists in dealing with many ethical dilemmas they may encounter. From highly sensitive issues of national security to everyday questions such as accepting a dinner from a source, putting a bumper sticker on one's car, publishing a personal opinion blog, a journalist must make decisions taking into account things such as the public's right to know, potential threats, reprisals and intimidations of all kinds, personal integrity, conflicts between editors, reporters and publishers or management, and many other such conundra. The following are illustrations of some of those.

- The Pentagon Papers dealt with extremely difficult ethical dilemmas faced by journalists. Despite government intervention, The Washington Post, joined by The New York Times, felt the public interest was more compelling and both published reports. (The cases went to the Supreme Court where they were merged and are known as *New York Times Co. v. United States*, 403 U.S. 713.^[19])
- The Washington Post also once published a story about a listening device that the United States had installed over an undersea Soviet cable during the height of the cold war. The device allowed the United States to learn where Soviet submarines were positioned. In that case, Post Executive Editor Ben Bradlee chose not to run the story on national security grounds. However, the Soviets subsequently discovered the device and, according to Bradlee, "It was no longer a matter of national security. It was a matter of national embarrassment." However, the U.S.

government still wanted The Washington Post not to run the story on the basis of national security, yet, according to Bradlee, "We ran the story. And you know what, the sun rose the next day."^[20]

- The Center for International Media Ethics, an international non-profit organisation "offers platform for media professionals to follow current ethical dilemmas of the press" through its blog. Besides highlighting the ethical concerns of recent stories, journalists are encouraged to express their own opinion. The organisation "urges journalists to make their own judgments and identify their own strategies."^[21]
- The Ethics AdviceLine for Journalists, a joint venture, public service project of Chicago Headline Club Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists and Loyola University Chicago Center for Ethics and Social Justice, provides some examples of typical ethical dilemmas reported to their ethical dilemma hotline and are typical of the kinds of questions faced by many professional journalists.

A partial listing of questions received by The Ethics AdviceLine:^[22]

- Is it ethical to make an appointment to interview an arsonist sought by police, without informing police in advance of the interview?
- Is lack of proper attribution plagiarism?
- Should a reporter write a story about a local priest who confessed to a sex crime if it will cost the newspaper readers and advertisers who are sympathetic to the priest?
- Is it ethical for a reporter to write a news piece on the same topic on which he or she has written an opinion piece in the same paper?
- Under what circumstances do you identify a person who was arrested as a relative of a public figure, such as a local sports star?
- Freelance journalists and photographers accept cash to write about, or take photos of, events with the promise of attempting to get their work on the AP or other news outlets, from which they also will be paid. Is that ethical?
- Can a journalist reveal a source of information after guaranteeing confidentiality if the source proves to be unreliable?

See also

- Advocacy journalism
- Citizen journalism
- Ethical Journalism Initiative
- History of American Newspapers
- History of Journalism
- International Federation of Journalists
- Journalism
- Objectivity (journalism)
- Ombudsman
- Order of the Occult Hand
- Organisation of News Ombudsmen
- Parachute journalism
- Public Editor
- Reporters Without Borders
- Yellow journalism

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10. ^ UK - Press Complaints Commission - Codes of Practice (<http://www.pcc.org.uk/cop/practice.html>) (see item 12, "Discrimination")
11. ^ **(Italian)** Italy - FNSI's La Carta dei Doveri (The Chart of Duties) (http://web.archive.org/web/20080412103717/http://www.fnsi.it/Contenuto/Documentazione/CarteDeontologiche/Carta_dei_Doveri.htm) (section "Principi")
12. ^ **(Spanish)** Spain - FAPE's Código Deontológico (Deontological Code) (http://www.fape.es/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=101&Itemid=120) (see *Principios Generales*, item 7, "a")
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External links

- Center for Journalism Ethics (<http://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/>)
- Center for International Media Ethics CIME (<http://www.cimethics.org/>)
- EthicsforMedia - Education in Journalism Ethics (<http://www.ethicsformedia.org/>)
- Ethical Journalism Initiative (<http://www.ethicaljournalisminitiative.org>) A global campaign of the International Federation of Journalists
- Ethics code of the Society of Professional Journalists (http://www.spj.org/ethics_code.asp)

- Journalistic Standards and Practices (<http://cbc.radio-canada.ca/accountability/journalistic/index.shtml>) of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
- BBC Editorial Guidelines: code of ethics for content producers (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/>)
- Databank for European Codes of Journalism Ethics (<http://www.uta.fi/ethicnet/>)
- Canadian Association of Journalists Ethics Committee (<http://www.caj.ca/?cat=9>)
- The Freedom Forum (<http://www.freedomforum.org/>) An international, nonpartisan foundation dedicated to freedoms of press and speech
- Committee to Protect Journalists (<http://www.cpj.org/index.html>) Deals with press freedom worldwide, defends right of journalists to report the news without fear of reprisal.
- The Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association "Canon of Journalism" (<http://www.pressnet.or.jp/english/about/canon.htm>)
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