1 Why Ethics Matters in Journalism

Our society needs news professionals who do the right thing

Learning Goals

This chapter will help you understand:

• why ethics is vitally important in a journalist’s everyday work;
• why responsible journalists adhere voluntarily to high standards of conduct;
• how journalists should make ethically sound decisions;
• how discussing the case studies in class is crucial to learning the decision-making process;
• how the digital era, in revolutionizing the way the news is gathered and delivered, has provoked a controversy over ethical standards; and
• why the public depends on ethical journalists more than ever.

Lovelle Svart, a 62-year-old woman with short, sandy hair, faced the video camera and calmly talked about dying. “This is my medication,” she said, holding an orange bottle of clear liquid. “Everyone has told me … I look better than I did ten years ago, but inside, I hurt like nobody’s business.” On that afternoon of September 28, 2007, after she had danced the polka one last time and said her goodbyes to family and close friends, the contents of the orange bottle quietly killed her.1

Svart’s death came three months after her doctor informed her she would die of lung cancer within six months. The former research librarian disclosed the grim prognosis to a reporter friend at The Oregonian in Portland, the newspaper where she had worked. She said she had decided to avail herself of Oregon’s assisted-suicide law. Svart also said she wanted to talk to people frankly about death and dying, hoping she could help them come to grips with the subject themselves. Out of that conversation grew an extraordinary mutual decision: On its website and in print, The Oregonian would chronicle Lovelle Svart’s final months on earth (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1
Lovelle Svart faces the camera during one of her “Living to the End” video diaries on The Oregonian’s website.
PHOTO BY ROB FINCH. REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF THE OREGONIAN.
In her series of tasteful “video diaries,” she talked about living with a fatal disease and about her dwindling reservoir of time. In response, hundreds of people messaged her on the website, addressing her as if they were old friends.

But before Svart taped her diaries, journalists at The Oregonian talked earnestly about what they were considering. Most of all, they asked themselves questions about ethics.

The threshold question was whether their actions might influence what Svart did. Would she feel free to change her mind? After all the attention, would she feel obligated to go ahead and take the lethal dose? On this topic, they were comforted by their relationship to this story subject. Familiarity was reassuring, although in the abstract they would have preferred to be reporting on someone who had never been involved with the paper. In 20 years of working with her, they knew Svart was strong‐willed; nobody would tell her what to do. Even so, the journalists constantly reminded her that whatever she decided would be fine with them. Michael Arrieta‐Walden, a project leader, personally sat down with her and made that clear. The story would be about death and dying, not about Svart’s assisted suicide.

Would the video diaries make a statement in favor of the controversial state law? No, they decided. The debate was over; the law had been enacted and it had passed court tests. Irrespective of how they and members of the audience felt about assisted suicide, they would just be showing how the law actually worked – a journalistic purpose. They posted links to stories that they had done earlier reflecting different points of view about the law itself. Other links guided readers to organizations that supported people in time of grief.

In debates among themselves and in teleconferences with an ethicist, they raised countless other questions and tried to arrive at answers that met the test of their collective conscience. For example, a question that caused much soul‐searching was what to do if Svart collapsed while they were alone with her. It was a fact that she had posted “do not resuscitate” signs in her bedroom and always carried a document stating her wishes. Still, this possibility made them very uncomfortable – they were journalists, not doctors. Finally they resolved that, if they were alone with her in her bedroom and she lost consciousness, they would pull the emergency cord and let medical personnel handle the situation. As Svart’s health declined, they made another decision: They would not go alone with her outside the assisted‐living center where she lived. From then on, if they accompanied her outside, there would also be another person along, someone who clearly had the duty of looking out for Svart’s interests.2

The self‐questioning in the Oregonian newsroom illustrates ethics awareness in contemporary journalism. “Twenty years ago, an ethical question might come up when someone walked into the editor’s office at the last minute,” said Sandra Rowe, then the editor of The Oregonian. “We’ve gone through a culture change. Now an ethical question comes up once or twice a week at our daily news meeting, where everyone can join the discussion. We are confident we can reach a sound decision if everyone has a say.”3
The Incentives for Ethical Behavior

Most journalists see theirs as a noble profession serving the public interest. They want to behave ethically.

Why should journalists practice sound ethics? If you ask that question in a crowd of journalists, you would probably get as many answers as there are people in the room. But, while the answers may vary, their essence can be distilled into two broad categories. One, logically enough, is moral; the other could be called practical.

• **The moral incentive.** Journalists should be ethical because they, like most other human beings, want to see themselves as decent and honest. It is natural to crave self-esteem, not to mention the respect of others. There is a psychic reward in knowing that you have tried to do the right thing. As much as they like getting a good story, journalists don’t want to be known for having exploited someone in the process.

• **The practical incentive.** In the long term, ethical journalism promotes the news organization’s credibility and thus its acceptance by the public. This translates into commercial success. What journalists have to sell is the news – and if the public does not believe their reporting, they have nothing to sell. Consumers of the news are more likely to believe journalists’ reporting if they see the journalists as ethical in the way they treat the public and the subjects of news coverage, Just as a wise consumer would choose a product with a respected brand name over a no-name alternative when seeking quality, journalists hope that consumers will choose their news organization because it behaves responsibly – because it can be trusted.

Why Ethics Standards Are Needed

There are also practical arguments for ethical behavior that flow from journalism’s special role in American life.

The First Amendment guarantee of a free press means that, unlike other professionals, such as those in medicine and the law, journalists are not regulated by the state and are not subject to an enforceable ethics code. And that is a good thing, of course. The First Amendment insulates journalists from retribution from office holders who want to control the flow of information to the public and who often resent the way they are covered in the media. If a state board licensed journalists, it is a safe bet that some members of the board would abuse their power to rid themselves of journalists who offend them. The public would be the loser if journalists could be expelled from the profession by adversaries in government.

But there is a downside to press freedom: Anybody, no matter how unqualified or unscrupulous, can become a journalist. It is a tolerable downside, given the immense benefit of an independent news media, but bad journalists taint the reputation of
everyone in the profession. Because they are not subject to legally enforceable standards, honest journalists have an individual obligation to adhere voluntarily to high standards of professional conduct. Ethical journalists do not use the Constitution’s protection to be socially destructive.

Yet another argument for sound ethics is the dual nature of a news organization. Journalism serves the public by providing reliable information that people need to make governing decisions about their community, state, and nation. This is a news organization’s quasi-civic function. But the news organization has another responsibility, too – and that is to make a profit. Like any other business, the newspaper, broadcast station, or digital news site must survive in the marketplace.

The seeming conflict of those two functions – serving the public, yet making money – is often regarded cynically. Decisions about news coverage tend to be portrayed by critics as calculated to sell newspapers, raise broadcast ratings, or draw Web traffic rather than to give the citizens the information they need. The truth is that good journalism is expensive, and the best news organizations invest significant sums in deeply reported projects that could never be justified in an accountant’s profit-and-loss ledger. If there is a pragmatic return in such projects, it is in the hope that they build the organization’s reputation as a source of reliable information.

Journalists cannot expect their work to be universally acclaimed. But they have an obligation to themselves and their colleagues to never deliberately conduct themselves in a way that would justify the criticism. They have an obligation to practice sound ethics.

The Growth of Ethics Codes

For reasons that are explored in Chapter 3, journalism matured in the second half of the twentieth century. During this period, it became common for individual news organizations to articulate their ethics standards in comprehensive codes, which can be useful guides in decision-making about the news. Today, not only professional organizations of journalists, but also individual newspapers, broadcast stations, and digital news sites typically have ethics codes.

There is a distinct difference in the effect of these two different kinds of codes. Although the codes of professional organizations fulfill an important purpose of establishing profession-wide standards, they are voluntary and cannot be enforced. But, when a newsroom adopts a code, violations can be enforced by suspension or dismissal of the violators. Of course, codes are valuable only to the extent that they are practiced, and newsroom leaders have a responsibility both to enforce their codes and to set an example of propriety.

Journalists new to the profession may be surprised to find that the rank-and-file reporters, editors, and photojournalists often are more effective than their bosses in enforcing the code. John Carroll, former editor of the Los Angeles Times, says that among journalists “certain beliefs are very deeply held,” and that the core of
these beliefs is a newspaper’s duty to the reader. “Those who transgress against the reader will pay dearly,” Carroll says, adding that this intensity usually is masked by a laid-back newsroom demeanor. “There’s informality and humor, but beneath the surface lies something deadly serious. It is a code. Sometimes the code is not even written down, but it is deeply believed in.” See his Point of View essay, “A ‘Tribal Ferocity’ Enforces the Code,” at the end of this chapter for more of John Carroll’s thoughts on the subject.

The Goal: Make Ethically Sound Decisions

In this text and in the ethics course you are studying, you will continue your preparation for a journalism career by examining how good journalists make responsible decisions. The text will identify and discuss the principles of applied ethics that are a foundation for sound decision-making. As the course progresses, you will practice your decision-making skill in case studies. The goal is to encourage you to think critically and in concrete terms about the situation confronting you – to employ logic rather than respond reflexively.

You should know that there are capable, intelligent journalists who reject the idea that journalism ethics can be taught in a college course. They argue that journalists, and journalism students, either are honorable, or they are not. If they are honorable, this hypothesis continues, they will automatically make the right decision and so do not need this course. If they are not honorable, no college course is going to straighten them out. As an esteemed editor remarked to a college audience, “If your mom didn’t teach you right from wrong, your college teacher is not going to be able to.”

Although there is truth to that statement, it misses the point. The author of this textbook assumes that you did learn honesty and propriety in your early life. In fact, this course is intended to build on your own sense of right and wrong and to show how to apply that sense to solving ethics problems in the profession.

Journalism prizes essentially the same values as the rest of society – values like honesty and compassion – but sometimes journalists have conflicts in values that their fellow citizens do not. For example, your mom would instruct you to always go to the aid of someone in need. However, journalists might have to weigh intervention to help one person against their duty to inform the public about thousands of other people in the same sort of adversity. If they intervene, they destroy the story’s authenticity – and they fail to inform the public.

Another flaw in the critics’ argument is the presumption that honorable journalists will reflexively do the right thing. Your mom may not have taught you a decision-making procedure. As you will discover, “the right thing” is not always obvious. You will see that sound decision-making goes beyond instinct and carefully considers – in a process called critical thinking – the pros and cons of various courses of action.
Honing Decision Skills through Case Studies

The case-study method gives you a chance to work through difficult decisions in the classroom without consequences and without deadline pressure. The experience will prepare you for making on-the-spot ethical decisions in the real world. Each of the case studies selected for class discussion is intended to teach an important nuance about news media ethics.

In addition to explaining the principles of journalism ethics and teaching a decision-making process, this course in journalism ethics gives you two valuable opportunities:

- You can study the thinking of academics and experienced practitioners on recurring problems that journalists face. While you should always do your own critical thinking, you don't have to start with a blank slate. You can draw on the trial-and-error efforts of people who have gone before you in the profession. Their experiences can help you think clearly about the issues.
- You can practice your decision-making technique in a classroom setting where no one is hurt if a decision proves to be flawed. Just as a musician, an actor, or an athlete improves through practice, you benefit by thinking through the courses of action you might take in the case studies. You should emerge from the course with a deeper understanding of the challenges of the profession and with infinitely more confidence about your own decision-making.

You should also keep in mind that an applied-ethics course prepares you for a career in which you will be dealing with people who want to influence the way you report the news. Because journalists work for the public, it would be a betrayal of the public's trust to allow themselves to be diverted from the truth. The ethicist Bob Steele describes the manipulators:

You will be stonewalled by powerful people who will deter you from getting to the truth. You will be manipulated by savvy sources who do their best to unduly influence your stories. You will be used by those with ulterior motives who demand the cover of confidentiality in exchange for their information. You will be swayed by seemingly well-intentioned people who want to show you some favor in hopes that you, in return, will show them favoritism in the way you tell their story.5

A cautionary note is in order. Although ethical considerations may occasionally cost you a story, being an aggressive reporter and being ethical are not mutually exclusive. Keep in mind that your job is to inform your audience, and that means being a good, resourceful reporter who gets the story into the paper, on the air, or on the Web.

Given the real-life problems you will study in this course, it could be easy to conclude that the ethical choice is simple: Decide against publishing, broadcasting, or posting any news story that is the least bit questionable. But such a choice would itself be unethical. It would signify a failure to fulfill the journalist's mission of informing the public.
The 21st-Century Debate over Ethics

As the new century arrived, the news industry entered a tumultuous period of transition as it reacted to a revolution in the technology of gathering and delivering the news.

Digital journalism is rapidly becoming the dominant news medium. And no wonder: The Web matches radio and television’s speed; it can far exceed newspapers’ depth of content; and it adds the unique dimension of an instantaneous conversation with the audience. With prose, video, still images, and audio available at the consumer’s demand, the Web offers exciting opportunities. Not the least of these is the ability to involve the audience itself in reporting the news.

The statistics confirm the increasing popularity of digital as a source of news (Figure 1.2). In 2012 the Pew Research Center’s biennial news consumption survey showed that 39 percent of respondents answered “online/mobile” to the question “Where did you get news yesterday?” That was more than the percentage who received news from radio (33) or newspapers (29) and second only to television (55). (The percentages add up to more than 100 because some respondents received news from multiple sources.)

Figure 1.2
Digital surpasses print as source of news, 1991–2012. Survey respondents were asked, “Where did you get news yesterday?”

GRAPHIC COURTESY OF BILL MARSH.
DATA REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF THE PEW RESEARCH CENTER.
Unfortunately, online and mobile sites have been less successful in attracting advertising dollars. The revenue shortage threatens the credibility of digital news in two ways. First, websites have tended to skimp on staffing, which can translate into lapses in accuracy in covering the news, especially on a news-delivery medium based on speed. Second, the money crunch has led some business executives to experiment with revenue-producing ideas that blur the line between news and advertising.

Given the pervasive presence of the Internet and social media today, it is astonishing to realize that the digital era in journalism dates only to the mid-1990s. Students reading this textbook have literally grown up with digital journalism — along with texting, tweeting, and Facebook friending — and that is how their generation predominantly receives the news. But, in the context of 400 years of journalism history, the digital era is a blink of the eye.

Right now, in newsrooms across the country, the standards are being forged for digital journalism. Typically, the decision process is about a feverish rush to post a news story before someone else does, or about an expedient solution to a short-term, money-related problem such as a shortage of staff. Collectively, whether they realize it or not, the decision-makers are creating a template for the future of journalism.

At the same time, a controversy over ethical standards has exploded. In an environment in which so much has changed, we increasingly hear arguments that our professional principles must change as well. Some journalists propose that the neutral point of view should be replaced with news stories that both describe the event and tell the audience what the reporter thinks about it. Some say it would improve the news media’s credibility if journalists revealed their opinions of the people and events they cover.

To the contrary, this textbook contends that it is precisely in a period of technological transition that we should adhere to time-honored principles.

“Ethical standards can’t be tailored to a specific delivery medium,” said Bill Marimow, editor of The Philadelphia Inquirer. “Doing the right thing can’t be based on whether you’re reporting in print, on broadcast or online.”

Michael Oreskes, who later became senior vice president and editorial director of NPR, observed early in the digital era that “pressures are great at times of change, and so it follows that times of change are when standards matter most.” Having a website, Oreskes wrote, “doesn’t change a simple editing rule: You shouldn’t run something before you know it’s true.”

Maureen Dowd of The New York Times wrote in a 2013 column emphasizing the importance of content over news-delivery medium: “It is not about pixels versus print. It is not about how you’re reading — it is about what you’re reading.”

Of course, journalism ethics evolves, as the profession demonstrated in formulating the ethics codes that proliferated in the second half of the twentieth century. That evolution continues in the digital age, but the evolutionary process should be based on collaboration and shared experience. It should reflect logic rather than reflex.

There is no question that the new technology has brought new ethical challenges. In the old order, there was nothing like social media, in which journalists participate both as professionals and as private citizens. Still, traditional ethical standards can
guide us. For example, social media make it easier for journalists to gather facts and images from citizens who either possess specialized knowledge or have witnessed and possibly photographed breaking news. The time-honored standard of verification still applies to this content. As another example, an old standard – that journalists should not publicly reveal their opinions on controversial matters – applies to the journalists’ personal Facebook pages, which are manifestly public.

As this new edition of *The Ethical Journalist* was being prepared, the orderly evolution of journalism ethics was continuing as three professional organizations engaged in a collegial discussion of the subject. The ethics committee of the Society of Professional Journalists was examining its 1996 code and formulating revisions that were adopted in 2014 (its new code appears in Chapter 7). The Online News Association was producing an analysis of about 40 topics as a smorgasbord from which journalists could choose to create do-it-yourself ethics codes. The Radio Television Digital News Association was revising the code it adopted in 2000 when “Digital” did not appear in its name.

Journalism rests on three principles: First, it is an *independent act* of gathering and disseminating information. Second, the practitioner *owes first loyalty to the citizens who consume the news*. Third, the practitioner is dedicated to truth-seeking and a discipline of *verification*.

In the view of this textbook’s author, those broad principles define journalism. The definition could serve as a job description for anybody who aspires to be a journalist, provided he or she is committed to meeting the high standards that the definition implies. Such a person could be a staff member of a mainstream print, broadcast, or online organization – or a citizen blogger or tweeter or anyone else who purports to report and comment on the news, even as a hobby.

This text’s purpose is to identify and discuss the ethics standards that dedicated journalists live by. Those standards help journalists gain the trust of citizens who are seeking the reliable information they need to be self-governing in a democracy. Ethical journalists, regardless of whether they are a part of an established news organization or reporting on their own, must be *credible*.

**A Different Role for Journalists**

Today’s news consumer can draw on a vast array of information sources. The day is long past when editors in a distant newsroom decided what information was worthy of passing along to the public, and what was not. “Journalists can no longer be information gatekeepers in a world in which gates on information no longer exist,” Cecilia Friend and Jane B. Singer wrote in *Online Journalism Ethics*. Twenty-first-century journalism requires a different interpretation of the gatekeeper role. A democratic society now depends on journalists to be its surrogates in sifting the huge volume of information available, testing it for accuracy, and helping citizens understand it. “*Gatekeeping* in this world is not about keeping an item out of circulation,”
Friend and Singer wrote. “[I]t is about vetting items for their veracity and placing them within the broader context that is easily lost under the daily tidal wave of‘new’ information.”

In *The Elements of Journalism*, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel wrote that, in the new environment, a journalist must play the roles of Authenticator and Sense Maker. As Authenticator, the journalist works with audiences to sort through the different accounts of a news event and help them “know which of the facts they have encountered they should believe and which to discount.” As Sense Maker, the journalist puts “events in context in a way that turns information into knowledge.”

Although the technology for delivering the news is changing radically, the public’s need for reliable information is the same. Confronting a daily deluge of information, citizens will look for sources they can trust to be accurate and fair, to be independent, and to be loyal above all to the citizens themselves.

More than ever, they will depend on ethical journalists.

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**Point of View**

**A “Tribal Ferocity” Enforces the Code**

John Carroll

One reason I was drawn to my chosen career is its informality, in contrast to the real professions. Unlike doctors, lawyers or even jockeys, journalists have no entrance exams, no licenses, no governing board to pass solemn judgment when they transgress. Indeed, it is the constitutional right of every citizen, no matter how ignorant or how depraved, to be a journalist. This wild liberty, this official laxity, is one of journalism’s appeals.

I was always taken, too, by the kinds of people who practiced journalism. My father, Wallace Carroll, was editor and publisher of a regional newspaper, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The people he worked with seemed more vital and engaged than your normal run of adults. They talked animatedly about things they were learning – things that were important, things that were absurd. They told hilarious jokes. I understood little about the work they did, except that it entailed typing, but I felt I’d like to hang around with such people when I grew up. Much later, after I’d been a journalist for years, I became aware of an utterance by Walter Lippmann that captured something I especially liked about life in the newsroom. “Journalism,” he declared, “is the last refuge of the vaguely talented.”

Here is something else I’ve come to realize: The looseness of the journalistic life, the seeming laxity of the newsroom, is an illusion. Yes, there’s informality and humor, but beneath the surface lies something deadly serious. It is a code. Sometimes the code is not even written...
down, but it is deeply believed in. And, when violated, it is enforced with tribal ferocity.

Consider, for example, the recent events at The New York Times.

Before it was discovered that the young reporter Jayson Blair had fabricated several dozen stories, the news staff of The Times was already unhappy. Many members felt aggrieved at what they considered a high-handed style of editing. I know this because some were applying to me for jobs at the Los Angeles Times. But until Jayson Blair came along, the rumble of discontent remained just that, a low rumble.

When the staff learned that the paper had repeatedly misled its readers, the rumble became something more formidable: an insurrection. The aggrieved party was no longer merely the staff. It was the reader, and that meant the difference between a misdemeanor and a felony. Because the reader had been betrayed, the discontent acquired a moral force so great that it could only be answered by the dismissal of the ranking editors. The Blair scandal was a terrible event, but it also said something very positive about The Times, for it demonstrated beyond question the staff’s commitment to the reader.

Several years ago, at the Los Angeles Times, we too had an insurrection. To outsiders the issue seemed arcane, but to the staff it was starkly obvious. The paper had published a fat edition of its Sunday magazine devoted to the opening of the city’s new sports and entertainment arena, called the Staples Center. Unknown to its readers – and to the newsroom staff – the paper had formed a secret partnership with Staples. The agreement was as follows: The newspaper would publish a special edition of the Sunday magazine; the developer would help the newspaper sell ads in it; and the two would split the proceeds. Thus was the independence of the newspaper compromised – and the reader betrayed.

I was not working at the newspaper at the time, but I’ve heard many accounts of a confrontation in the cafeteria between the staff and the publisher. It was not a civil discussion among respectful colleagues. Several people who told me about it invoked the image of a lynch mob. The Staples episode, too, led to the departure of the newspaper’s top brass.

What does all this say about newspaper ethics? It says that certain beliefs are very deeply held. It says that a newspaper’s duty to the reader is at the core of those beliefs. And it says that those who transgress against the reader will pay dearly.

This essay is excerpted from the Ruhl Lecture on Ethics delivered at the University of Oregon, May 6, 2004. John Carroll was then the editor of the Los Angeles Times.

Notes

3 Author’s telephone interview with Sandra Rowe, Sept. 21, 2007.
7 Bill Marimow, email exchange with the author, March 2013.
A Foundation for Making Ethical Decisions


12 Ibid., 218.

13 Kovach and Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism*, 27.