

Journalism Ethics: Why it all matters

“Ethics requires that intelligence fuse with intuition, that the process be internalized, and that decisions be made quickly and naturally.”

–Rushworth Kidder

Journalism Ethics 101

THIS HANDY GUIDE ON THE PROTECTION OF CONFIDENTIAL SOURCES.

SHOULD THE JOURNALIST REPORT THE SOURCE TO THE AUTHORITIES?

THE LEAK

HI, THIS IS JOHN SMITH AT THE WHITE HOUSE. I'VE GOT SOME INFO--WILL YOU KEEP MY IDENTITY CONFIDENTIAL?



YOU BET!

ANONYMOUS LEAKS ARE AN IMPORTANT WAY FOR INFORMATION TO GET OUT TO THE PUBLIC.

NO!

YOU KNOW THAT OUTSPOKEN CRITIC OF WHITE HOUSE POLICY? WELL, HIS WIFE IS A CIA OPERATIVE!



GOT IT.

TURNS OUT SHE'S A COVERT AGENT, AND REVEALING THAT IS A SERIOUS CRIME.

NO!

ALSO, I'VE GOT THIS IDIOT NEIGHBOR WHO DENTED MY CAR. HIS BROTHER IS A CIA MOLE WHO'S INFILTRATED AL QAEDA IN AFGHANISTAN.



OKAY.

THE SOURCE HAS AGAIN SHOWN HIMSELF TO BE A CRIMINAL, TALKING ABOUT HIS CRIME.

NO!

ALSO... I'M A SERIAL KILLER, AND I PLAN TO STRIKE AGAIN TOMORROW NIGHT!



YOUR SECRET'S SAFE WITH ME

IF SOURCES CAN'T TRUST THAT WE'LL KEEP THEIR IDENTITIES CONFIDENTIAL, THEY WON'T LEAK TO US!

NO!

Why do journalism ethics matter?

- This class is more than teaching a subject. It's teaching a craft, a trade. For many, it's a profession.
- If you want to be taken seriously and treated professionally, you have to be responsible in your practice of journalism.
- IT ALL STARTS WITH ETHICS.
- What does Ethics mean?
- Greek root — Ethikos: “Custom, habit”

- A major branch of philosophy. It's debatable. It's all *gray* area.
- The study of values and customs of a person or group.
- Ethics cover the analysis and employment of concepts such as right and wrong, good and evil, and personal responsibility.
- Our ethics basically are our moral character. It's who we are, or at least who we strive to be.

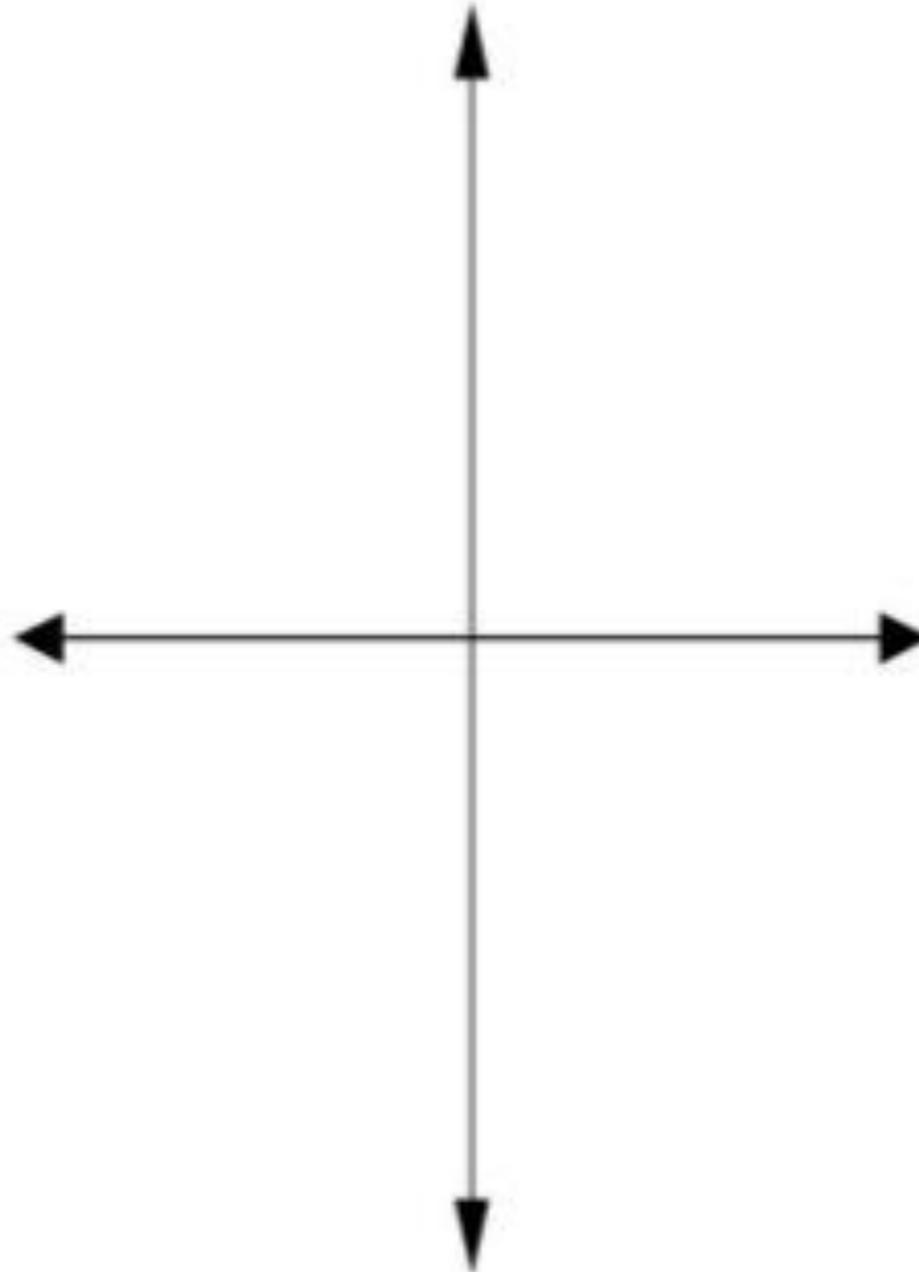
- A journalist's chief responsibility is reporting truthfully, without malice or intent to do harm, while also understanding the short- and long-term consequences of the outcome.
- Journalism is about "truth-seeking," and so is the law.
- As journalists, we have a public responsibility; respect for law and ethics is the mark of professionalism.

acceptable
by social norms

unacceptable by
legal standards
(e.g., copyright, fair
use, privacy)

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SPJ Code of Ethics

- Society of Professional Journalists is one of the oldest and strongest journalistic trade organizations.
- Its often-updated Code of Ethics is based on four principles:
 - Seek truth and report it
 - Minimize harm
 - Act independently
 - Be accountable

10 ethical questions reporters should ask themselves

- What do I know? What do I need to know?
- What is my journalistic purpose?
- What are my ethical concerns?
- What organizational policies and professional guidelines should I consider?
- How can I include other people, with different perspectives and diverse ideas, in the decision-making process?

- Who are the stakeholders — those affected by my decisions? What are their motivations? Which are legitimate?
- What if the role was reversed? How would I feel if I were in the shoes of one of the stakeholders?
- What are the possible consequences of my actions? Short term? Long term?
- What are my alternatives to maximize my truth telling responsibility and minimize harm?
- Can I clearly and fully justify my thinking and my decision? To my colleagues? To the stakeholders? To the public?

Everything has an impact

- Think!
- Don't be cavalier
- Don't be malicious
- What are the risks to those I'm writing about?
- What are the implications of what I write?



Common sense No-Nos

- Don't plagiarize. Ever. Seriously. Like, ever.
- Plagiarism destroys not only your credibility, but your publication's credibility. It reflects on you, your colleagues, even your upbringing.
- Don't quote or interview your family or friends unless you're writing a personal essay.
- Don't report on a story in which you or family members are directly involved.
- Don't accept gifts from sources.

- Always be FAIR AND NEUTRAL
- Seek out the truth and report all sides. Every side. Even the views you may personally disagree with. Readers detect bias. If they smell it in your writing, then they'll always think you stink.
- If you're writing about something critical, and your sources are critical of an individual, you have an obligation to contact that individual, regardless of how uncomfortable that can be.
- Write in an "objective" voice. Keep your opinions to yourself. If you're too invested in a topic to do that, then you shouldn't be covering the story.

- Always, always tell a potential source that you're a reporter and that you're working on a story.
- Never turn a conversation into an interview without a person's knowledge. You have to have an off switch.

- Admit your mistakes.
- We all make them. How we OWN them speaks to our character.
- Always correct your mistakes to the best of your ability.
- Remember, your credibility depends on it.