

# JOURNALISM ETHICS

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A PHILOSOPHICAL  
APPROACH

*Edited by*

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Christopher Meyers

# Journalism Ethics

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Edited by Christopher Meyers

# Journalism Ethics

*A Philosophical Approach*

EDITED BY CHRISTOPHER MEYERS

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*This book, like all else in my life, is dedicated to Donna*

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# Preface

“Journalism ethics? Har, har, har! It’s a comedy book, huh?” Words to that effect were the almost universal reaction when I told folks I was working on this project. Comments about oxymorons were often quick to follow, along with multiple complaints about the speaker’s hometown paper or TV news. In short, and surely not a surprise to anyone reading this, the general public’s reaction to journalism and journalism ethics is intensely negative.

The only other common response came almost exclusively from working or former reporters: “Why bother? Traditional news, or at least traditional newspapers, are dead in the water.”

Both reactions are, I think, mistaken. Yes, the ethics of journalism has no shortage of issues and horror stories; its practitioners undoubtedly could do a far better job of reporting ethically. These same judgments, though, apply just as well to the ethics of business, medicine, law, and, for that matter, the academy. If anything, reporters are more self-reflective and self-critical, as individuals and as a profession, than are all other groups with which I’ve worked.<sup>1</sup>

Further, despite dire warnings, I’m reasonably optimistic about newspapers’ viability. Their death knell has been rung many times before, particularly at the advent of the television age, and yet they consistently revamp and prevail. The current challenges are undeniably acute: competition from online media, deep distrust of mainstream media’s credibility and trustworthiness, a generally non-reading public, and an under-thirty population who say they get their news, if at all, from sources other than mainstream media; these factors all incline toward a pessimistic outlook. But as the chapters in this book attest in both direct and implied ways, we would all be far worse off without newspapers. Despite their many problems—ethical, political, economic—they remain vital to democratic societies and to individual communities.



Or at least the historical purposes and activities of newspapers, of traditional journalism, are vital. And despite the grand potential of online reporting, the work to date strongly suggests it won't be a viable replacement, not in its current forms, at any rate. Both mainstream media and new media will undoubtedly change—sometimes in ways that enhance the ethical values discussed below, sometimes (often) not.

Those among you who are currently news professionals, are in training, or teach, will decide which of those “sometimes” prevail. The array of forces currently changing journalism is complex and powerful, but it is not determinative. How journalism is practiced—via whatever medium—will be up to its practitioners; the public will always need information: to vote, to avoid scoundrels, to evade danger, to have one's beliefs challenged, or just to suggest where to eat and which movies to watch.

Journalism has ably, if not always perfectly, filled that role. This book is thus mostly about mainstream media, or at least about the traditional model of journalism, especially as it has been present in newspapers. While that model has been responsible for a slew of ethical debacles (think Jayson Blair, Janet Cooke, Jack Kelley, *Dateline NBC*<sup>2</sup>), it has also produced some of the most important stories in history, including Watergate and the Pentagon Papers. That model is also the driving force behind the heroic efforts of the *Times-Picayune*'s finding a way to scrape together a paper amid the devastation and flooding of Hurricane Katrina, and of *60 Minutes II* and Seymour Hersh's bravely breaking the Abu Ghraib scandal.<sup>3</sup> It is also reflected in the day-to-day willingness to take on controversial but vital causes, stories that won't go down in history but make all the difference in people's lives.<sup>4</sup>

Maybe I'm just desperately holding on to old ways, fingernails dragging as I'm pulled into a new journalistic model. To my mind, though, today's pressing question is not so much whether needed information is printed on a page, broadcast, or delivered digitally, but whether it is *believable*. Is its author committed to accuracy over ideology? Has it been properly researched and sourced? Has it been influenced by material gain, personal reward, or corporate profit? In short, can its recipients *trust it*?

The answer, of course, is that information is trustworthy if its sources are, and while the last forty years have seen a serious decline, mainstream media has historically held that status because it has insisted on methods and processes that merited it. Economic factors and a slippery slope of compromises have made it harder for mainstream media to sustain the most ethically important of those methods, while new media have not yet sufficiently established alternative standards; that is, they've not yet discovered how to gain trust in a nonhierarchical, largely editor-free world. Hence the need for books like this one, intended to remind reporters—current and in training—of the real reason for journalism and the most ethical methods for practicing it.

Whereas trustworthiness is earned through a number of means—for example, competency, communication skills, one's history, and one's associates—being ethical is clearly indispensable. It is almost never the case that one is seen as both unethical and worthy of trust.

What, then, does it mean to be ethical? The foundations are rooted in character, in the basic rules and attitudes one learns at mama's or papa's knee. But character is not fixed; one chooses—every day and throughout life—the kind of person one will be. Further, character simply provides motivation—to want to do the right thing, to seek out the right information, to analyze appropriately, and to act accordingly. Figuring out what to do with a complex problem requires one to determine what is at stake (i.e., what facts *and* values), who will be affected and in what ways, what options exist and what their likely consequences are, whether the problem is endemic to the practice, whether judged solutions will prevail or be used merely as window dressing, whether acting upon one's conclusions presents too great a personal risk, and whether the choice is consistent with how one wishes to define oneself. In other words, as I will repeatedly stress throughout the book, *ethics is hard work*.

This conclusion, admittedly, reflects my disciplinary bias. While an interest in practical ethics often begins with dramatic cases or problems, without the right foundation, answers will be unreliable and, often, superficial. To move beyond such superficialities, one must develop an informed and sophisticated theoretical and conceptual foundation. I have taught ethics—theoretical and applied, academic and in-setting—long enough to appreciate the power of gut moral reactions<sup>5</sup> and the associated belief that extensive ethical analysis is unnecessary to making good choices. But such gut reactions are merely the beginning of what must be a careful reasoned analysis.

I readily grant that philosophers are prone to take tough problems and make them far harder, sometimes unnecessarily so. Further, as I argue at length elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> there is nothing much worse than being asked to provide an ethics consultation in a professional setting, only to devote one's efforts to showing everyone how the case is much more complex than they originally thought, and then walking away without giving a clear recommendation. This, the onestandard philosophical approach to practical ethics, does a disservice both to the setting's professionals and, I think, to philosophy.

Practical ethics problems generally *are* complicated, demanding of careful reasoned scrutiny, rooted in sound conceptual and theoretical analysis. But they also have answers, or at least they have better and worse ones. Discerning the difference requires, as noted, a clear understanding of what's at stake, which in turn requires a clear understanding of the concepts and values. One cannot, for example, criticize a reporter for not being objective unless one knows just what that concept *means*.<sup>7</sup> Ditto for "privacy," "conflict of interest," "professional," and so on.

Hence this book's structure: Section One provides those theoretical and conceptual foundations, set within an informed journalistic backdrop, while Section Two is more practice oriented. The book was conceived as a text for journalism ethics or philosophy of journalism courses at the grad or advanced undergrad level, but the chapters are, I am pleased to say, impressive enough to also be of real value for scholars. The book is designed as I would teach a journalism ethics class, but one could easily move chapters around to fit one's needs—with the exception of Deni Elliott and David Ozar's opening chapter. One should begin there, since they provide an ethics decision-making model that later authors use or expand upon.

A last point about the contributors: they represent the best in the field and are a mix of journalism, communication, and philosophy scholars, most of whom also have a background as reporters. They worked diligently on their chapters, typically with multiple rewrites, striving to make difficult and complex issues both well reasoned and accessible. The results are remarkable and worthy of your careful read and reflection. Upon completion of the book, you should have a far richer understanding of the nature, value, and purpose of journalism and of how to be an ethical practitioner. Enjoy.

## Notes

1. In addition to my background in journalism and journalism ethics, I am the clinical ethicist at three area hospitals and I've worked extensively with government agencies and the legal community.

2. Blair was a *New York Times* reporter whose stories were found to be fabricated (2003); Cooke won a Pulitzer Prize for her gripping but, it turned out, fictitious account of an eight-year-old heroin addict in the *Washington Post* (1980); Kelley asked friends to pretend to be sources for his *USA Today* stories, many of which he had been making up for at least a dozen years (2004); and *Dateline NBC* did an investigative report on the propensity of certain General Motors vehicles to explode upon impact but used a hidden incendiary device to produce the explosion on tape. In each of these cases, further investigation revealed a newsroom culture of pressure, fear, and a willingness to look the other way while hotshot reporters came up with suspiciously good stories.

3. Hersh had been working on the story for some time when *60 Minutes II* broke it on April 28, 2004. Two days later, Hersh posted an initial version of his account in the online version of the *New Yorker*, with the full story coming out in print on May 10.

4. The weekend I wrote this, CBS's *60 Minutes* broadcast what was, for them, a routine show, with each segment being first-rate journalism—challenging of power, warning of threats, educating, enlightening, and humanizing. The next morning, however, the same network's *Early Show* pandered to the lowest common denominator, showing an Internet clip of a teen suicide.

5. For a fuller discussion of the role of moral intuitions, see chapter 22, by Julie Newton and Rick Williams.

6. *A Practical Guide to Clinical Ethics Consulting: Expertise, Ethos and Power* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), esp. chap. 1.

7. See chapter 9, by Stephen J. A. Ward, and chapter 10, by Carrie Figdor.

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# Acknowledgments

I am grateful, first and foremost, to the book's contributors. The quality of the book is wholly due to their hard work and great thinking.

Thanks also to Jolene Coombs, journalism teacher extraordinaire, for awakening in me a passion for news and its ethical foundations. Similar appreciation is owed to Jay Black for his many years of inspiring work in media ethics and for keeping me connected to associated ideas and the terrific scholars behind them.

I would also like to thank all those journalists who make ethics a high priority; they set the standard for their colleagues and provide a guidepost for many of the ideas to follow.

Special thanks to Brent Kennedy and the gals at Looney Bean, for keeping me fully caffeinated, and to Joe Contaldi, and the rest of the Performance Anglers, for reminding me that chasing an 18-inch brown is at least as valuable as chasing just the right sentence structure.

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# Contributors

**Jacqui Banaszynski** is the Knight Chair Professor, the Missouri School of Journalism, University of Missouri, Columbia, and an editing fellow at the Poynter Institute. She has worked for a number of newspapers and won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize in feature writing, having also been a finalist for the 1986 Pulitzer for international reporting.

**Jay Black** is a professor emeritus at the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg, where he held an endowed chair in media ethics and directed the Program for Ethics in Education and Community. He edited the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 1984–2008. He has coauthored or edited ten books, and presented five hundred papers and workshops, primarily on media and society and media ethics. In 1997 he was awarded the Freedom Forum's inaugural national Journalism Professor of the Year prize.

**Sandra L. Borden** is an associate professor of communication at Western Michigan University (WMU), having received her doctorate in mass communications from Indiana University in Bloomington. She is also a codirector of WMU's Center for the Study of Ethics in Society. Her chapter in this volume is based on her 2007 book, *Journalism as Practice: MacIntyre and the Press*. She has contributed chapters to a number of books, including Lee Wilkins and Clifford Christians's *Handbook of Media Ethics*. She has also published in a number of refereed journals, including the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, *Communication Monographs*, the *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, and the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*.

**Clifford Christians** is the Charles H. Sandage Distinguished Professor and Research Professor of Communications at the University of Illinois–Urbana, with joint appointments in Journalism and Media Studies. He has written widely on media ethics, taught

it for two decades, and served as the president of UNESCO's Privacy Protection Network, based in Seoul, Korea.

**Renita Coleman** is the coauthor of a book on moral development and journalists, *The Moral Media: How Journalists Reason about Ethics* (2005). She has conducted numerous studies of moral development, the results of which appeared in, among other places, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*. She received her PhD from the University of Missouri in 2001, after a fifteen-year career as a newspaper journalist, and now teaches journalism ethics at the University of Texas–Austin.

**Stephanie Craft** is an associate professor at the Missouri School of Journalism. Before earning a doctorate in communication from Stanford University, she worked as a newspaper journalist in California, Arkansas, and Washington. Her work has appeared in a number of refereed journals, including the *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, *Mass Communication & Society*, *Communication Law & Policy*, the *Howard Journal of Communication*, and the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*.

**Michael Davis** is a senior fellow at the Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions and a professor of Philosophy at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago. Among his recent publications are *Thinking Like an Engineer* (Oxford, 1998), *Ethics and the University* (1999), *Profession, Code, and Ethics* (2002), *Actual Social Contract and Political Obligation* (2002), and *Engineering Ethics* (2005). He has also coedited (with Andrew Stark) *Conflict of Interest in the Professions* (2001).

**Rick Edmonds** is a media business analyst for the Poynter Institute, where he has done research and writing for the last nine years. Since December 2007, his commentary on the industry has appeared in the Biz Blog on Poynter Online. He has also coauthored the newspaper chapter of the Project for Excellence in Journalism's State of the News Media report 2004–2009. He was a coauthor of Poynter's *Eyetrack 2007*, has contributed to Best Newspaper Writing anthologies, and regularly speaks at national and international conferences. His background includes eleven years with the *St. Petersburg Times* in various editor and publisher roles, including two years as the managing editor of the paper's Tampa edition. He was also James Reston's assistant at the *New York Times* and a reporter at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, where he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in national reporting in 1982.

**Deni Elliott** is a professor of philosophy and holds the Poynter Jamison Chair in media ethics and press policy at the University of South Florida in St. Petersburg. She also serves as the ethics officer for the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California and has published widely on practical and professional ethics.

**Carrie Figdor** received her doctorate from City University of New York and is an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Iowa. She is a former journalist with the

Associated Press and other mainstream media and combines this background with her research interests in metaphysics and the philosophy of mind. She has publications in the *Journal of Philosophy*, *Minds & Machines*, *Consciousness and Emotion*, and other journals.

**Candace Cummins Gauthier** has a PhD in philosophy from the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. She is a professor of philosophy at the University of North Carolina–Wilmington, where she has been teaching since 1986. She specializes in media ethics and health care ethics and has published numerous articles in applied ethics, including her 2002, “Privacy Invasion by the News Media: Three Ethical Models,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*.

**Paul Martin Lester** is professor of Communications at California State University–Fullerton. Lester received a master’s degree from the University of Minnesota and a PhD from Indiana University in mass communications, after working as a photojournalist for the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans. He is the author or editor of several books and has published numerous articles in major communications’ journals. He also wrote a monthly column, “Ethics Matters” with Deni Elliott, for *News Photographer* magazine for the National Press Photographers Association.

**Christopher Meyers** is a professor of philosophy at California State University–Bakersfield, and director of the Kegley Institute of Ethics. He has authored numerous essays on practical and professional ethics and wrote *Expertise, Ethos and Power: A Guide for Clinical Ethics Consultants* (2007). He is also on the medical staff at Kern Medical Center and has conducted multiyear participant–observer studies in television and newspaper newsrooms.

**Julianne H. Newton** is professor of visual communication and associate dean for undergraduate affairs, University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication, author of *The Burden of Visual Truth: The Role of Photojournalism in Mediating Reality*, and editor of *Visual Communication Quarterly* 2001–2006. Her publications on visual ethics span scholarly and public forums, and her documentary photographs have been shown in more than 50 exhibitions. She has worked as a professional word and visual journalist in newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. *Visual Communication: Integrating Media, Art and Science*, which she co-authored with Rick Williams, won the 2009 Marshall McLuhan Award for Best Book in Media Ecology.

**David Ozar** is a professor and codirector of graduate studies in health care ethics in the Department of Philosophy at Loyola University in Chicago. He served as the director of Loyola’s Center for Ethics from 1993 to 2006 and has served as a founding codirector of the Ethics AdviceLine for Journalists since 2000. He is also an adjunct professor of medical humanities in Loyola’s Stritch School of Medicine. He has published more than ninety articles and book chapters in professional journals and has coedited a book on human rights and coauthored a book on professional ethics.

**Patrick Lee Plaisance** is an associate professor in the Department of Journalism and Technical Communication at Colorado State University. He received his doctorate from Syracuse University and has worked as a journalist at various newspapers around the country. His work focuses both on the application of philosophical ethics to media practice and on social science research into decision-making and journalistic behavior. He has authored multiple publications, including *Media Ethics: Key Principles for Responsible Practice* (2008), and has contributed to several books and academic journals, such as *Communication Theory*, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, and the *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*.

**Aaron Quinn** is an assistant professor of journalism at California State University–Chico. His work has appeared in such publications as *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, and numerous other academic journals and books. He was the managing editor of the *Pinellas News*, a weekly newspaper in St. Petersburg, Florida; covered public safety for the *Bradenton Herald*, a daily newspaper in Bradenton, Florida; and was a freelance photographer who shot for the National Football League, National Hockey League, and other news and sporting publications.

**Ian Richards** is a professor and director of the postgraduate journalism program at the University of South Australia in Adelaide. He is also the chair of the university's Human Research Ethics Committee and the editor of *Australian Journalism Review*, Australia's leading refereed journal in the academic field of journalism. A former newspaper journalist, he received his doctorate from the University of South Australia. His publications include *Quagmires and Quandaries: Exploring Journalism Ethics* (2005).

**Jane B. Singer** is the Johnston Press Chair in digital journalism at the University of Central Lancashire (UK). Her research explores digital journalism, including changing roles, perceptions, and practices. Before earning a PhD in journalism from the University of Missouri, she was the first news manager of Prodigy Interactive Services. She also worked as a newspaper reporter and editor. Jane serves on the editorial boards of several academic journals, including the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, and is president of Kappa Tau Alpha, the national U.S. journalism honor society. She is on leave from the University of Iowa School of Journalism and Mass Communication, where she is an associate professor.

**Martha (Marty) Steffens** is the SABEW endowed chair in business and financial journalism at the University of Missouri School of Journalism. She spent thirty years in the newspaper business, including as executive editor of the *San Francisco Examiner* and the *Binghamton Press* and *Sun-Bulletin*. She was also an editor for the *Los Angeles Times*, *Minneapolis Star*, *Dayton (Ohio) Daily News*, and *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. She often lectures in China and the Middle East.

**Stephen J. A. Ward** is the James E. Burgess Professor of Journalism Ethics at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He received his doctorate from University of Waterloo and is the author of *The Invention of Journalism Ethics: The Path to Objectivity and Beyond* (2005). He is the director of [www.journalismethics.info](http://www.journalismethics.info), a comprehensive Web site devoted to journalism ethics.

**Edward Wasserman** is the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation professor of journalism ethics at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. Since 2001 he has written a biweekly column on the media for the *Miami Herald* and the *Palm Beach Post*, which is distributed nationally by the McClatchy–Tribune News Service. Wasserman joined Washington and Lee in 2003 after a career in journalism that began in 1972 and included working for news organizations in Maryland, Wyoming, Florida, and New York. Among other positions, he was the CEO and editor-in-chief of American Lawyer Media's Miami-based Daily Business Review newspaper chain, executive business editor of the *Miami Herald*, city editor of the Casper (Wyo.) *Star-Tribune*, and editorial director of Primedia's 140-publication Media Central division in New York. Wasserman received a bachelor of arts cum laude in politics and economics from Yale, a *licence* in philosophy from the University of Paris, and a PhD from the London School of Economics, where he studied media politics and economics.

**Herman Wasserman** is a senior lecturer in journalism studies at the University of Sheffield, United Kingdom. He previously taught at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, where he still holds a visiting position as associate professor extraordinary. He was a Fulbright fellow at the School of Journalism at Indiana University, and a media ethics colloquium fellow at the University of Missouri. Before joining the academy, he worked as a newspaper journalist in Cape Town. His research interests include global journalism ethics; journalism in emergent democracies; and media, culture, and society in Africa. He edits the journal *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies*.

**Lee Wilkins** is a Curator's Teaching Professor at the University of Missouri. She is also a professor at the Missouri School of Journalism and an editor of the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*. Her research includes studies of media coverage of the Midwest flood of 1993; the Bhopal, India, disaster; and global climate change during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the results of which have appeared in leading communications ethics journals and as book chapters. She is also the coauthor of multiple books in media ethics and criticism. Her doctorate is in political science from the University of Oregon; her professional career includes work as both a political reporter and an editor for newspapers in three states.

**Rick Williams** is an award-winning visual arts communications scholar and documentary photographer and the Chair of the Division of the Arts at Lane Community College. His research includes theoretical and practical explorations in the use of art and visual



communication as pedagogical tools that help students integrate rational and intuitive intelligences to enhance creativity, intelligence, problem solving, decision making, and performance across academic and professional disciplines and life practices. His books include an ethnographic/photographic study, *Working Hands* and *Visual Communication: Integrating Media, Art and Science* with co-author Julianne Newton. *Visual Communication* won the 2007 AEJMC Creative Projects Award, NCA Outstanding Achievement in Visual Communication Research Award, and the 2009 Marshall McLuhan Award.

**Wendy N. Wyatt** received her doctorate from the University of Oregon and is an associate professor of media ethics in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the University of St. Thomas. In addition to interests in media and democracy and media literacy, she has developed a theoretical perspective on press criticism that is introduced in her book, *Critical Conversations: A Theory of Press Criticism* (2007).

## SECTION ONE

# *Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations*

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## PART I

# Ethics Theory and Decision Making

### Introduction

Imagine you are the mayor of a small town in Greece during World War II.<sup>1</sup> You've had generally good relations with the occupying German forces, mostly Austrians, but then the peace is shattered when a small group of Greek guerilla fighters kills four German soldiers as they lounged on the beach. The guerillas, all from different islands than yours, are frustrated with their compatriots' complacency toward their occupiers and are trying to motivate a wider resistance movement. They are eventually captured and tortured, but the SS officer who has come to oversee the interrogation reminds you of the standing policy: for every German death, twenty Greeks will be killed. Thus, you are brought to the town square—where eighty islanders have been gathered—and given a choice. If you kill—beat to death, it turns out—the three guerillas who survived the torture, the eighty will be spared and only sent to a labor camp for the duration of the war.

What should you do?

If you are like the hundreds of students to whom I've presented this scenario, and if you think it through with even a bit of care, your reaction probably is, indeed probably should be, "How can I possibly know the morally right choice?" You might have considered eighty lives versus three and decided to whack away. But it doesn't take much pushing to see how that choice is at least problematic: Should we ever become direct participants in evil? Is that the kind of legacy you want attached to your name and memory? What is your relationship with the eighty hostages, or with the guerillas, and how should that affect your choice? Is killing them consistent with any reasonable standard of justice? Does your role as mayor bring special moral duties?

In short, while your initial analysis may have been deeply thoughtful, even insightful, it was nonetheless probably ad hoc, based on gut reactions rooted in upbringing or religion (or in evolutionarily determined brain structure—see Julie Newton and Rick Williams’s essay in chapter 22). Or, once you’re pushed by questions like those above, you may fall back on some form of relativism: “Who am I to judge anyone else’s answer, since there are no right answers in ethics?”

In a ten-week college quarter, I proceed to show students, first, why such relativism, at least in its simplest forms, is false, and, second, how the great theorists have attempted both to explain the nature of ethics and to provide a method for ethics decision-making.<sup>2</sup> And those ten weeks barely scratch the surface.

In a practical ethics course, like journalism ethics, you obviously don’t have that luxury. You need a brief introduction to the nature of ethics and a good method for working out tough problems. Most practical ethics books have addressed these needs by providing excerpts or summaries of the classical theorists—for example, Aristotle, Kant, Mill, Ross, Rawls, Gilligan—along with brief editorial explanations and criticisms. Students are then told to work their way through the arguments, often from dense original sources, and to somehow conclude from this how to better manage ethics decision-making.

For years I taught this way, in large part because that’s how I had been taught and because existing books did not provide a good alternative. Students undoubtedly benefited from being exposed to some of history’s great minds and from being forced to think deeply about such moral concerns as duty, consequences, character, justice, and relationships. In my experience, though, two things typically happened. First, those students who took the task seriously inevitably rode the “he’s right, no *he’s* right, no . . .” roller coaster; that is, they read Aristotle and were convinced his is the best theory. Until they read Kant, when they became convinced anew. And then Mill. . . .

That reaction reveals why students should have at least some exposure to these theories: despite their respective problems, these great thinkers draw attention to fundamental human insights.

But insights don’t, as the saying goes, pay the bills.

In the, at best, two weeks typically devoted to ethics theory and method in a practical ethics course, one hopes the students learn what’s interesting and important in ethics—those “impressive insights,” particularly as they relate to concerns like duty, consequences, character, justice, and relationships. But as faculty, we must realize they haven’t learned *how* to apply ethics, even if they become truly convinced by any of the theorists. Part of the reason they don’t know how to apply ethics is that such a brief overview just cannot provide the necessary details and nuance. For example, how would Kant distinguish (always prohibited) lying from (sometimes allowable) withholding of information? How does Mill try to solve the problem of justice? Are there guiding principles

in Aristotle's virtue theory? Is Rawls's Original Position a real thing or just a heuristic device? These are all glorious topics, ones to which moral philosophers devote lifetimes, but they are far beyond the purview of a practical ethics class.

For the student just trying to figure out whether to whack the guerillas, or more realistically, whether it's OK to lie to sources or to invade a politician's privacy, the ambiguity and abstractions get old quick. She needs, instead, a practical method for addressing tough ethical problems.

Largely because of this first reaction, many students simply ignore all the theory as the course moves into the issues section. Exposure to the theorists means students now address problems in a more informed fashion, but in all but rare cases, their approach is still largely ad hoc. Studying the theories was an interesting intellectual exercise, but one quickly forgotten when the course turns to the (in their mind) *real* material. The professor can force students to continue addressing the theorists by creating artificial assignments—"Write a paper explaining what Kant would say about protecting sources and how Mill would respond"—but they truly are artificial; great, maybe, for budding philosophers, but for everyone else too often seen as just another classroom hoop to jump through.

Hence the dilemma: How can one provide a practical method for ethics decision-making without it being hopelessly superficial? As mentioned above, there's a reason we continue to read the classics: their authors recognized sophisticated moral reasoning necessarily entails certain key elements; that is, they teach us that we must acknowledge at least the following:

- The inherent moral force present in key principles such as "respect for persons,"
- The obligation to benefit others,
- The need to develop a virtuous character,
- The special duties attached to personal and professional relationships, and
- The importance of treating others justly.

Thus any ethics method worth its name will retain a sophisticated, philosophically informed discussion of vital moral and metaphysical concepts. And it will do so in a way that is sympathetic to all parts of the canon. If we've learned anything from the last forty years of the practical ethics movement, it is that careful moral reasoning incorporates central points from each of the classical theorists. To see them as necessarily distinct or incompatible, as, again, most practical ethics texts do, is to miss critical subtleties. Take three examples, commonly misrepresented: Kant thought results were critical to ethical choices, just not the defining feature; Mill's rule-utilitarianism is, in practice at least, virtually indistinguishable from some versions of deontology; and Aristotle's virtue theory allows for, probably even demands, a reliance on moral principles.<sup>3</sup> In other

words, all the classical theorists accepted variants on all the elements in the list above, even if they strongly stressed individual parts. Thus, any plausible version of an ethics method must incorporate them all, while also realistically assessing the empirical circumstances in which choices reside.

Deni Elliott and David Ozar's essay does just this. Elliott and Ozar, two of the more respected philosophers working in practical ethics today, address ethics decision-making from top-down and bottom-up perspectives. That is, they build upon classical theory but also situate decisions within the realities and options present in journalistic practice, asking "three basic questions": "Whom do the members of the profession serve?"; "What good do they do for those they serve?"; and "What is the ideal relationship between the professional and the person served?" From this analysis of the purpose of journalism, they then develop clear ethical principles for the working journalist, principles grounded in classical ethical theory. From there they devise a specific method—a "systematic moral analysis" (SMA)—to follow when faced with an ethical problem.

Elliott and Ozar deserve deep thanks and respect for their work. No framework will please everyone—some will stress principles more than outcomes, others character more than individual choices—but their SMA is indeed an impressive start, one that the student or professor should feel free to adjust as needed.

One of the first things the discerning student will notice upon reading Elliott and Ozar's essay is *this stuff is hard*. Despite the cultural norm of too often simplifying complex problems,<sup>4</sup> all one need do is peek under those superficial covers to realize ethics decision-making is fraught with uncertainties—factual, epistemological, and axiological—that demand extensive, and often thorny, analysis.

This does not mean, however, such uncertainty amounts to moral relativism. That *problems* are complex, requiring careful empirical and normative analysis, does not mean there aren't correct *answers*. To the contrary, while each situation brings its array of context-dependent variables, I align with W. D. Ross in believing when one discerns that situation's right answer, it is *the* right answer, the one all persons in morally similar circumstances should adopt.<sup>5</sup> This places, in fact, an even greater duty upon each of us to take ethics decision-making quite seriously; if there are *right* answers, there are also *wrong* ones, ones any moral person should strive mightily to avoid.

Why? Because, Renita Coleman explains, that is what morally mature persons do. Children and nonhuman animals act almost exclusively from self-interest, or at most from clan interest. Building upon Kohlbergian development theory, Coleman explores the social conditions that motivate persons to expand the circle of those whom they feel obliged to treat as moral beings, worthy of respect and decent consideration. She then applies this theoretical construct to specific professions, including journalism, revealing "the most important influences on journalists' quality of ethical reasoning."

One of those influences is their organization's ethical culture. As you read this book and as you think about the myriad ethical dilemmas individual journalists face—and cause—ask yourself whether it is realistic to reduce these problems to independent, autonomous choices. As I type this, banner headlines announce the likely trillion-dollar bailout of the U.S. financial industry, due, as even the current Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson attributed it, to Wall Street “excesses.”<sup>6</sup> While such excesses were undoubtedly the result of individual greed and recklessness, it is widely acknowledged the actions occurred within a *culture* of excess, one that not only tolerated such behavior but even valorized it.

As the numerous studies confirm, it is naïve to think each of us is a moral island, able to brush aside powerful organizational influences—for good or ill.<sup>7</sup> One must have a method for ethics decision-making—and Elliott and Ozar's is as good as I've seen—but if the institution creates an ethical culture, an ethos, that encourages, for example, getting the story at all costs or treating sources as mere means, it will take the strongest of characters to consistently act rightly.

For the budding practitioner, this reality is important for three reasons. First, it serves as a warning flag: Be careful about where you go to work and pay close attention to the *real* behavioral norms. Are they paying lip service to high ethical standards while rewarding (with a wink and a nudge) those who bend the rules? Second, know your own standards, know which lines you are not willing to cross.<sup>8</sup> And, finally, develop your character to the point where you can, in fact, stick to those standards, to resist the inevitable temptations to see such lines as merely suggestions.

Understanding the organizational ethos is also important for the professor and scholar. While I may lose my philosopher's card for publicly acknowledging this, the best theory is of little value if it is devoid of a deep understanding of empirical realities. Elsewhere I urge that one employ ethnography as the preferred empirical method,<sup>9</sup> but any method that gets at structural norms and motivations would do. As this book progresses, I will point to examples of professional and organizational ethos, as revealed in the essays and in case studies.

## Notes

1. This story is excerpted from John Fowles's wonderful novel *The Magus* (Boston: Little Brown, 1978), chap. 53.

2. Disputing relativism is, in fact, an easy task: It is wrong, absolutely wrong, to torture a child simply for the fun of it. It is wrong, regardless of the place or time period. No sane person thinks this proposition is false and, in fact, I have never met a single person who genuinely believes (i.e., who isn't just playing the academic game) otherwise. Now, *why* relativism is false, that takes a lot more time to explain.

3. On the last point, see Rosalind Hursthouse's discussion of “v-rules” in *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).



4. That “cultural norm” is reinforced by news media’s routine characterization of social and political problems in stark, and often extremist, either/or positions.

5. For a fuller explanation of this “universalist contextualism” see my, “Appreciating W. D. Ross: On Duties and Consequences,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 18 no. 2 (2003), pp. 1–18.

6. NBC, “Meet the Press,” September 21, 2008.

7. The most compelling of these studies are Philip Zimbardo’s infamous “Stanford Prison Experiment,” detailed in his book, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2008), and Stanley Milgram’s *Obedience to Authority* (London: Pinter & Martin, 2005). Patricia Werhane’s *Moral Imagination and Management Decision Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) is, in my judgment, the best philosophical review of the topic and a must read.

8. See, for example, the film “Broadcast News,” in which Jane (played by Holly Hunter) confronts the rising star Tom (played by William Hurt) for on-air deception. She says, “You totally crossed the line between” only to have him interrupt with, “It’s hard not to cross it; they keep moving the little sucker, don’t they?” The movie also nicely illustrates the range of temptations, from the excitement at getting a great story, to deadline pressures, to awards and promotions.

9. *A Practical Guide to Clinical Ethics Consulting: Expertise, Ethos and Power* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), esp. chap. 4.

# I

## An Explanation and a Method for the Ethics of Journalism

*Deni Elliott and David Ozar*

The aim of this chapter is to help readers understand their responsibilities as persons and as journalists, and to provide them with a framework for addressing the ethical issues that routinely arise in the practice of journalism. Our approach, which is informed by the basic tenets of Western ethical traditions and which borrows from Ozar's and Elliott's previous works, develops from the abstract to the concrete.<sup>1</sup> That is, we move from a discussion of the purpose of journalism, and the specific values that emerge from that purpose, to ideal relationships and practice rules, and, ultimately, to a recommended method.

In doing this we assume what Michael Davis defends in chapter 6—that journalism is a profession and, thus, that its practitioners assume special role-based duties. Those duties, for journalists as for all professionals, are reflected in but not fully captured by the respective code of ethics of each profession. Codes, as in the one developed by the Society for Professional Journalists,<sup>2</sup> provide a snapshot of a profession's ethical norms. But, given their necessary brevity and the often political process by which they are developed, they cannot provide a complete picture.

Our approach instead is empirical and normative; we explore what journalism does—its historically and politically grounded social function—and then draw from this its core values. We then align these values with classical moral injunctions not to harm and to respect others' rights, from which emerges our recommended method.

We want to stress the importance of the empirical. Most philosophical ethics treatises begin with abstract principles to which, they insist, practice must align. But it is the rare professional who learns their ethical duties in this

top-down fashion. Rather, they learn from members of the profession in regular communication with one another about their practice, in their interaction with the people to whom they provide their services, and in the relationships that emerge from all these interactions. New practitioners observe how the members of the profession judge one another's conduct, how the people whom the profession serves judge their conduct, and how the larger society judges and reacts to all of this. And they imitate or avoid the behavior of professional role models, both positive and negative.

This is the most important "classroom" for professional ethics. And it is in this complex, ever-changing blend of interactions and communications, with its commendations and criticisms, that the full details of the ethics of a profession are expressed and acquired. Further, as Christopher Meyers suggests in the introduction to this chapter, the interactions that influence the formation of ethics vary not only by profession but by organization. Thus, the ethics of the *New York Times* will differ, if sometimes only in subtle ways, from those of the *Washington Post* or NBC News.

None of this, though, lends itself to easy articulation. Explaining what one has learned or is learning from the practice of a profession in interaction with those they serve and the larger society depends on having some conceptual tools specifically designed for this purpose. In addition, having conceptual tools, which we call here a method of systematic moral analysis (SMA), brings to consciousness some of the decisions that people generally make based on habit or intuition. Once the method of ethical decision-making is brought to a conscious level, it is much easier to ensure all ethically relevant aspects are considered and, subsequently, to explain and defend the resulting decisions.

Journalists make choices that cause emotional, physical, financial, or reputational harm; such harm is built into journalistic functions. Another way of thinking of this is to note that, since journalism fulfills a vital social function (see the essays by Stephanie Craft and Sandra Borden), journalists have a *duty* to cause harm. Thus, they must be able to effectively evaluate when they can prevent or reduce harm, when such harm is fully justified, and how to explain their choices both to those they harm and to the citizens they serve.

We think the best way to unpack these concerns is to ask three basic questions: "Whom do the members of the profession serve?"; "What good do they do for those they serve?"; and "What is the ideal relationship between the professional and the person served?"<sup>3</sup> The first two get at the purpose of journalism, thereby revealing its core values, which in turn inform the relationship analysis. The first two also, it turns out, are so closely intertwined that neither of them can be answered satisfactorily until a careful answer to the other has been developed. But we need to begin somewhere, and so we start with the first.

## Whom Does Journalism Serve?

One obvious answer to the question of who journalism serves would be that journalism—and therefore journalists—serve readers, listeners, and viewers in the journalist's society. That is, they serve the audiences of the various print and electronic media by which journalists communicate. This first effort at an answer suggests that the practice of professional journalism includes anything and everything that one might speak about and is directed at anyone who happens to be listening. But this is not how journalism understands itself and, when we are reflective about it, this is not how the rest of our society expects journalism to be practiced. That is, this is not how the profession of journalism is understood in the ongoing dialogue about journalism and its ethics in our society.

A more informative answer to the question of who journalism comes from journalists themselves: "the public." Admittedly, these words are sometimes used to refer to everyone in the relevant society. But when journalists say they serve the public, they use this expression with a specific connotation that is central to understanding journalism's professional ethics. "The public," in this context, refers, to a geographic *population*, a whole society, the whole group of people living in a particular society at a particular time. Of course, the benefits of journalists' expertise reach other persons as well, that is, people outside that society; and journalists are pleased when their work assists these people. But journalism as it is ordinarily practiced, and especially as it is understood in the dialogue about journalism and ethics in our society, is focused on the people of *our* society.<sup>4</sup> But what the people living in a society have in common, from the point of view of journalism's professional role, is not that they happen to be living in the same geographic location, but that they *interact* with one another. The public that journalists serve is the people of that society, insofar as those people are involved in public matters. This is the same public that we refer to when we use the expression "public affairs." For journalism, the public is the people of the society specifically regarded as engaging in actions that actually or at least potentially *affect other persons* in the society.

By contrast, members of many professions (e.g., doctors, nurses, and counselors) serve primarily individuals, and their expertise benefits principally these people, with other persons only indirectly involved. There are members of other professions, such as elementary and secondary school teachers, who serve small groups of people primarily. But journalism's commitment is to serve "all the people," the society as a whole, and to relate to that society precisely insofar as people's actions actually or potentially affect the lives of others in the society. This is the public that journalism serves.

Some journalists' audiences may in fact be very small, but that is not because journalism as a profession views those it serves only in terms of small groups. Journalism's commitment is to serve the whole population of a society,

even when it turns out the audience is a small, specialized subgroup. Although there is no hard and fast line to be drawn, if a person serves a subgroup audience such that the interests of the larger society have no role, this person is more likely to be viewed as an advocacy or public relations specialist rather than as a professional journalist.

In this respect, journalism resembles public administration, which similarly is always serving the whole population of a particular society at a particular time and place (although the ethics of public administrators derive first of all from their role as public servants rather than from their membership in a profession). Thus, for example, if a newspaper published a story that was of no value to the public but served only to please the leaders of a particular company, this would not be a proper use of the professional expertise of the journalists involved, even if the story was completely accurate. For this reason, such an action would rightly be judged unprofessional and would be unethical unless a very good reason could be offered for setting aside, in this particular situation, journalism's professional commitment to serve the whole society.

### What Good Does Journalism Do Those It Serves?

Having answered the question, "Whom does journalism serve?" let us turn to the second question, "What good does journalism do for those it serves?" What things of worth, and what harms, does journalism produce? To ask this question more technically, what are the *central values* of journalism? That is, what are the social values journalism is committed to produce and, thus, what are the ethical values journalists must embrace to achieve them?

Two answers leap to mind: *knowledge of the truth* and *information*. But the first of these proves immediately problematic. Even apart from complex philosophical questions about how one might measure truth or assure its delivery, most of what is offered as knowledge in our society is closely connected to very detailed explanations of the evidence for the claim, the methods used to gather and process the evidence, and the reasoning linking the evidence to the conclusion that is offered as knowledge. Journalists, however, rarely have the opportunity to delve into a topic in great depth; and even when they do, it is rare that a journalist can offer the public all the evidence and reasoning that is needed to support a claim that is offered as knowledge. So it seems more accurate to say that one of the central values of journalism that good journalists provide to the public is *information*.

There are many kinds of information, even if we focus narrowly on information for the public, as defined above. Does journalism's ethics hold every kind of information to be of equal value, or do different kinds of information have different levels of ethical priority for the journalist?

Some kinds of information are essential for people to function as a society, and the absence of such information makes it extremely difficult for individuals

to work together in groups and for both individuals and groups to give direction to the society and to effect important changes in the society when these are needed. This is the kind of information that both journalists and political theorists have in mind when they talk about journalism as an essential tool for controlling governments' abuses of power and for preserving and growing a democratic society (see Craft's and Borden's essays in part two). And it is people's lack of access to such information that is decried in societies without an independent press. Clearly there is a lot of information about governments and other institutions and centers of power in the society—and about the persons who hold offices or in other ways wield such power—that the people of any society *need* in order to effectively function as a society and pursue their collective or individual goals.

In addition, the information a society needs to function effectively includes information about matters of safety. Of course, some threats to health and physical well-being are recognizable using common sense observation. But, especially in complex societies like ours, there are many threats to health and well-being that are not easily identified. People need such information to protect themselves and to minimize the negative effect of things that are unavoidable, and thereby to be able to interact in dependable and effective ways and to achieve their collective and individual goals.

Further, as societies become more complex, new forms of social and organizational power arise that are not readily recognizable by commonsense observation but that have the potential to harm people, either directly or by limiting their opportunities for change and growth. In such cases, information about the bases of power and the persons who wield it is something people need in order to interact dependably and effectively to achieve their collective and individual goals.

These are three examples of the kind of needed information that journalism is committed to providing to the society it serves.<sup>5</sup> In fact, as we explain in more detail below, it is this role-related responsibility of providing needed information that makes journalism unique.<sup>6</sup> Notice also that, while human societies certainly have characteristics in common, and therefore there are certain categories of information that every society needs, it is also true that societies are significantly different from one another. Therefore, one of the central ethical values to which journalists must be committed is undertaking discerning pursuit and effective dissemination of needed information: they must recognize and distinguish the kinds of information needed by the society being served and ensure that the information is effective and accurate and is heard and read.

In making ethical judgments, journalists are required by their professional ethics to prioritize the discerning communication of needed information. The second-highest priority is to provide information that enables people to respond to their *desires*, specifically to the desires that the members of the society consider to be common to everyone, or almost everyone, in the society. Two fairly obvious examples from U.S. society are the value most people place on learning

about the generous and self-sacrificing actions of exceptional individuals, and on hearing or reading about leisure pastimes (sports, cultural pursuits, vacation opportunities, etc.).

These are areas of human life that are widely valued across our whole society and, because of this, are also widely seen as bonds within the society itself. Therefore, when providing this information, it is reasonable for journalism to consider itself to be serving the public, rather than merely a number of individuals. Because journalists should be committed to providing information related to common social desires, they are duty-bound to be sufficiently attuned to society's interests and to clearly, accurately, and effectively convey the desired information.

But the information society *desires*, though its value is widely agreed upon in the society, is *optional* rather than *needed* for societal functioning or for people to pursue their collective and individual goals.<sup>7</sup> This is the reason that, from the point of view of journalism's professional commitments, information related to *needs* outranks information related to *desires*.

There are also many things that people might seek information about that are neither matters of need nor matters of desires but are widely affirmed across the society. These individualized interests can be called "preferences," and include those things we want to know about that do not have a significant effect on the strength of the society; that is, they affect it neither directly nor because they are widely shared and so function to bond us. The expertise of the journalist could be used to serve people's preferences, but that is not the reason a society establishes and supports journalism. That is, providing information about people's preferences is not a central value of journalism.

The fact that information about people's preferences is not a central value of journalism is another reason that, as in the earlier example, it is arguably a misuse of professional expertise to report on something that benefits only a subgroup of society. For in that case, it is the group's preferences rather than the needs of the society or the common desires of the public that are being served.

In addition to providing information the society needs and information about the common desires of the society, there are two other central values that should be mentioned here. The first is *autonomy*. Every profession enables those it serves to overcome aspects of powerlessness, to take (or resume) control of something important in their lives. Many journalists are uncomfortable with a claim they are somehow responsible to empower others, but we see this as an indirect commitment: by doing their jobs well, by accurately reporting on vital information, and by acting as a watchdog of powerful institutions, journalists enhance society members' autonomy.

Autonomy refers to a person's or group's ability to act on the basis of the values and goals that person or group has chosen. It correlates closely with the notion of self-determination, except that the expression "self-determination" does not naturally account for the values and goals that groups strive to act on.

When people lack needed information, good journalism can provide the good of the information they need and can thereby enable people to act more effectively to achieve their goals: providing people with information enhances their autonomy. A great deal of journalism's enhancement of autonomy is achieved by providing needed information. But there are many ways in which an individual's or a group's autonomy can be diminished and, therefore, there are many ways in which autonomy can be enhanced.

For example, many people view themselves as prevented from acting on their chosen values and goals by complex bureaucratic government systems. Reporting about persons who overcame bureaucratic obstacles can help them view themselves as able to handle the challenge rather than passively give up. Similarly, challenging these same systems when they overstep their democratic functions grants power indirectly to individuals and groups who may otherwise feel impotent. In addition, some journalistic organizations have used their power over information, or their more direct social power, to get bureaucracies to respond to individuals or groups that the bureaucracy has been overlooking or ignoring, thereby enhancing those persons' or groups' autonomy.

A fourth central value of journalism is *community building*. In addition to providing the society with information and enabling individuals and groups to act autonomously, it is also part of journalism's appropriate work to build the bonds of the society in other ways. "Human interest" stories are an example of stories that help build community. Consider stories about individuals or groups in the society who go out of their way to help other individuals or groups in need. Such stories contribute to community building in two ways. They reassure the members of the society that, even when they find themselves unable to respond to a need, there are others in the society who might assist them. Even though they may be unable to help themselves, they are not automatically cut off from the concerns of others: they remain, even under difficult circumstances, fellow members of the community. Second, such stories can also motivate other individuals or groups in the community to help others, either by contributing effort or other resources to the same good cause or by acting more energetically in relation to another cause.

A second example of "human interest" stories that contribute to community building is stories of persons suffering misfortune, even if there are no special efforts being made by others to assist them when the story is reported, and stories of the admirable achievements of members of the society. As Jacqui Banaszynski argues in chapter 16 of this volume, stories of other persons' misfortune can elicit empathy for those currently in trouble, and such feelings can bind members of the community together. Similarly, stories of achievement can elicit feelings of admiration or even pride that the person who has succeeded in a particular achievement is a member of one's own society. In this way such stories can contribute to community building even if they do not prompt readers to act in response. In fact, many who read or hear the story may not