

Codes of Ethics

CHRIS ROBERTS

The University of Alabama, USA

A code of ethics is a document that putatively describes the loyalties, values, minimum standards, and aspirational goals of an individual or organization. Ethics codes are one of many accountability systems for journalists. They state overarching ideals and define some of the practical behaviors required in the quest to reach those ideals. They are common for professions and for occupations, such as journalism, that aspire to professional status or otherwise make a claim of social responsibility. Hundreds of journalism codes of ethics exist internationally, including a few that seek to define international standards for journalism.

Codes are as common as they are controversial across the globe, with nearly as many purposes, uses, and expectations as there are nations and media organizations. They can inspire. They can explain. They proscribe how journalists should act toward newsmakers, news consumers, the weak, the powerful, and toward other journalists. They universally condemn the black-and-white sins of lies and plagiarism. When read as a whole, they offer insight into the complicated relationships among competing values and loyalties that journalists must consider when making ethical decisions. They can be used to keep out governmental interference, or used by government to influence journalists. They help the public spot journalistic heroes and measure journalism that falls short.

A few codes purport to describe a global ethic for journalists, but most take a local focus influenced by their national cultures, media traditions and economic systems, and governmental regulation. Codes can be created and self-imposed by individuals who engage in acts of journalism, crafted as codes of practice and/or principles by journalism organizations whose membership is voluntary, agreed on by trade unions, or handed down by employers and governments as codes of conduct for practitioners. Some general codes are designed to foster a universal understanding of media ethics and obligations, while others are created with a single journalist or group of journalists in mind. Some focus on a narrow journalistic occupation, geographic region, or religious belief. Some are widely quoted and used; others ignored. Some offer broad platitudes, while others dictate specific guidelines to follow in specific situations. Some mix aspirations with minimal standards, which can be confusing when the differences are unclear.

While most codes articulate common values—especially the declaration of pursuit of “truth” as a fundamental value and the public as a fundamental loyalty—their application varies widely. Some codes are understood to be unenforced and unenforceable, while others bring legal or employment implications. Even as different codes share similar vocabulary, the definitions of similar terms vary widely. Codes can be used both to assert journalistic independence and elicit ethical behavior in socially responsible media systems, and as tools to control and punish journalists in authoritarian systems.

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As in other professions and occupations, journalistic codes of ethics serve multiple purposes. They state the ideals and minimum standards of journalism, which helps newcomers to the craft. Crafting codes allows practitioners to critically analyze the ideals and practices of journalism, but those codes are often insufficient when making ethical decisions: Codes provide insight into ethically gray issues but can be self-contradictory, given the competing values and demands of ethical journalism. Codes also serve a public relations function, giving the public an understanding of and justification for journalism. They can boost credibility and provide standards by which journalists can be held accountable (Black & Roberts, 2011).

Journalistic codes are tied to the rise of journalism as an occupation in the nineteenth century, widening acceptance of objectivity as a worthy pursuit, and journalism's quest for professional status amid criticism of news and business practices. The phrase "codes of ethics" began appearing in the United States in the 1840s (Dicken-Garcia, 1989). The Missouri Press Association in the late 1870s approved a statement that did not use the word "objectivity" but clearly had it in mind in stating that journalism needed "press independence, articles that omit useless details, stories based on 'brain work,' and the avoidance of partisan articles" (Ward, 2015, p. 230). The first "code of conduct" for journalism practice came in 1890. Individual newspapers created ethics-focused documents within the next few decades, as reporting and editing became occupations. The arrival of stand-alone journalism programs at universities, and the textbooks they spawned, contributed to a journalism committed to objectivity, truth-telling, and ethical behavior (Dicken-Garcia, 1989).

Among the earliest general ethics codes was created by Polish journalists in 1896 (Bruun, 1979). The 1918 National Union of French Journalists' charter of professional conduct called for responsibility, justice, and similar professional standards, and even the notion that a journalist should not "confuse his role with that of a policeman." In the United States, the first general code is attributed to what is now known as the American Society of News Editors (ASNE), founded in 1922 and merged in 2018 with the Associated Press Media Editors. The ASNE's 1923 statement of principles, cast through the prism of the United States' First Amendment, called for responsibility, freedom of the press, eschewing conflict of interests, truth and accuracy, impartiality, and fair play. In 1926, the Sigma Delta Chi fraternity for journalists (forerunner to the Society of Professional Journalists, or SPJ) published its own code of ethics based on the ASNE code. The SPJ code (2014), aimed first at print journalists but now a general code with no specific mention of geography, communication channel, or reporting focus, has been updated five times since 1973 and translated into more than a dozen languages.

Elsewhere, codes came to Sweden and Finland by 1924, and the British National Union of Journalists published a code just after World War II. The Australian Journalists' Association code debuted in 1944; two years later came Japan's Yomiuri Code and Venezuela's media code of practice. Regional codes, such as the Alliance South-east Asian Nations code of 1972, share the commonality of Islam. Codes for most other nations began appearing in the 1950s and later, depending on their level of press freedom. The number of codes and their statuses as living documents is difficult to track; some academic collections include more than 400. The codes mentioned in this entry are available at <http://accountablejournalism.org>.

Many codes have been drafted and revised to adopt to emerging technology and new ethical concerns. Codes often reflect specific journalistic focuses of coverage, and others are tied to specific communication channels. Groups representing journalists who cover business, education, food, religion, sports, and even chess have their own ethics codes. Press councils in many nations offer codes—sometimes aimed at providing accountability within societies with free press, and other times to control journalism. Channel-specific codes began in the United States in 1928 with the Radio Code established by the National Association of Broadcasters, and they quickly spread elsewhere. Journalists working in television have multiple codes, developed and updated across many years in many nations. Journalistic occupations, including news designers and press photographers, have specific codes.

The rise of the Internet has led to revisions of old codes, the introduction of new codes, and continuing discussion of an overarching global media ethic that can be defined in an ethics code or similar statement. This new interest in code creation and revision is important because of the following:

1. New web-based news organizations may not have the ethical imprimatur carried over from a long history in older communication channels. The act of drafting a code of ethics can help practitioners and organizations discover their values as well as stake a claim as an ethical performer in the wide and wild competition of online news.
2. News practitioners may be less likely to work in organizational settings, and instead be in small or single-employee establishments. They may feel that older codes from “mainstream” news organizations do not apply to them. To accommodate this, the Online News Association developed a “build your own” ethics code platform, which requires users to accept fundamental journalistic values before clicking to “create codes that reflect their own journalistic principles” (Online News Association, 2014). Some see this individualistic effort as an understanding of the pluralism of the world’s journalism and journalists, while others prefer codes that speak to common themes and avoid subjective ethical approaches (Ward, 2014).
3. New technology brings new ethical concerns, or at least requires new thinking to understand ethical implications of faster publication, increased interaction with audiences via social media, and the use of tools such as photo editing software. New codes have been written to guide bloggers and journalists using social media, for example. Revisions of older codes, such as those to the Society of Professional Journalists code in 2014, are accounting for digital age concerns, such as the ability to provide news consumers with source documents used in reporting and the “extended reach and permanence of publication” of stories stored in online databases.
4. Changes in the understanding of journalism ideals require changes in codes. This is especially true for the concept of objectivity. The term was mentioned as an ideal in some early journalism codes, but some older codes have removed the term in revisions while newer codes steer clear of the term in favor of different ideals in the context of accuracy and truth-telling. Among those newer ideals is “transparency” between news organizations and news consumers. New codes call for transparency of messages, including access to the information used in a report and reporting

technique. They also call for transparency of messengers, so that news consumers recognize the worldview of a news organization and can communicate with news workers and among themselves.

5. Some argue that global standards of ethical journalism should exist, because of an understanding of universal human rights, because technology pushes information to global audiences, and because journalists based in one nation report in and disseminate information to nations with differing ethical standards and practices. Such considerations of a global/communitarian journalism ethic long precede the Internet. An international conference in 1922 proposed an international code, but none was written. A regional code, by the Inter-American Press Conference, was published in 1926 (Bruun, 1979). The United Nations's Universal Declaration of Human Rights included the right for all to send and receive "information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization pursued that idea in its 1978 Mass Media Declaration and the 1980 report from its International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems. The McBride report stated the freedoms needed by journalists while calling for a global code as a "major factor in the establishment of a new world information and communication order" (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1980, p. 243). Several dissenting committee members called the implementation of a global code impossible, given the wide differences in press freedom and concerns about rules handed down by outsiders.

Nonetheless, some journalism ethicists and entities remain in pursuit of a globally accepted ethics code. The International Federation of Journalists' Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists, first adopted in 1952, was among the first to move media ethics beyond a local or regional concern. UNESCO's 1983 International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism included calls for people's right to true information, and for journalists to be dedicated to objective reality, be socially responsible, have professional integrity in multiple ways, and show respect for privacy, human dignity, and cultural diversity. Other individuals and groups have offered universal principles of journalism since then, but turning them into practical codes that can be applied across cultures and governmental controls remains difficult.

Any reading of codes crafted by various organizations in various nations reveals common themes to describe grand expectations for journalism excellence. Describing all the variations is impossible. Many codes, especially in nations where journalism has a bent toward libertarian and/or social responsibility, include a litany of aspirational standards that are worthy to pursue when gathering and disseminating information and minimal practices to follow. Those aspirational standards (adapted from Moore, 2010) include:

1. providing truthful, verified, accurate, original information in context to serve the public interest;
2. showing restraint to minimize harm both to news consumers and people who are subjects of news stories or contacted by working journalists;
3. being transparent both in message and as messenger; and
4. independence from outside influence.

The Society of Professional Journalists code (2014) is typical. It begins with a call for public enlightenment as a pursuit for justice. It then lists four principles: seek truth and report it; minimize harm; act independently; be accountable and transparent. Within those four principles are 36 bullet points that contain a few minimum standards (“Never plagiarize. Always attribute.”) and many short sentences on specific situations and topics of concern. Such topics include undercover reporting, anonymous sources, trial coverage, the differences between private and public people, refusing most gifts, and exposing unethical journalism. Some topics provide aspirations, while others are rules that may allow exceptions when pursuing a greater good.

Codes diverge in what they consider important. Himelboim and Limor (2010), in an analysis of 242 ethics codes published in 94 countries in 2006, categorized codes by journalism’s dual roles toward the public and toward loci of power. They found that just 48% of the codes included statements about providing information for the public interest, and 47% mentioned seeking truth as a fundamental obligation in the adversarial role of journalism. They also showed that a small percentage of codes called for journalists to promote societal values and national loyalty—principles at odds with calls for independence stated in other codes.

Ethical journalism requires practitioners to define and understand key principles, to resolve the inherent conflicts among competing values and loyalties, and to provide sound ethical justifications for those decisions. Codes of ethics are designed to help—but rarely do they provide a single “right” answer, much less a single answer. Codes of ethics are therefore often problematic, for both philosophic and practical reasons.

Critics of code philosophy (see, for example, Black & Barney, 1985) argue that codes impinge on the freedom of individual journalists and are written with moralistic tone instead of marinating within moral philosophy. Further, they let journalists rely on regulations instead of becoming autonomous moral agents who use high levels of moral development when making and justifying decisions. At their best, they are a starting point for discussion that leads to personal acceptance of decisions. At their worst, they allow for mindless rule-following that lets practitioners make legalistic decisions that have little to do with ethics. Multiple scholars of moral development argue that codes, especially those imposed on practitioners, reinforce a groupthink or corporate view that overshadow a greater ethical good.

Practical concerns include code’s inclusion of ill-defined terminology, the blurring of important distinctions between minimum standards and aspirational statements, and the reality that codes can be unhelpful, ignored, and misused.

The nature of journalism, like most human enterprises, requires that ethics codes necessarily conflict with themselves if they are to help practitioners reach decisions in complex scenarios. Self-contradiction is a feature, not a bug, when codes that spell out the wide-ranging loyalties and values that can conflict when making decisions with no clear-cut answers. In this way, they can help journalists think more expansively about the implications of their decisions. For example, there exists a conflict in two key values in many codes—the seeking and reporting of truth versus concerns of harming others through such practices as invading privacy or misleading the subjects of

reporting. Journalists must work through those conflicting values, which makes codes simultaneously helpful and unhelpful.

Other codes, however, are contradictory in different ways. For example, a Bangladeshi code of conduct calls for journalists to seek truth and accuracy, but not publish information damaging to the nation. Some codes would call that a conflict of interest. Or others might define “truth” in the context of nationalism, which leads to the concern about codes using similar terms but with different meanings.

Codes also can be unhelpful when used more as a public relations tool than to solve issues. An analysis by Himelboim and Limor (2008) noted that 55% of 242 ethics codes in 94 countries mentioned the value of freedom of the press, but many were in nations with low levels of press freedom. This gives cover to less-than-free nations, which can use direct control or semigovernmental press councils that issue codes of conduct, to proclaim the presence of freedom even as they require loyalties that restrict journalism’s fundamental value of truth-telling.

The presence of codes also raises questions of enforcement. Some codes explicitly state that they are not to be considered enforceable in court or other legal proceedings. Some discuss the value of calling out colleagues and others who practice journalism in unethical ways. Corporate codes are used to police conduct of their employees, making offenders subject to sanction or job loss. Others are designed to be used in semi-judicial proceedings convened by press councils. And still others are used as legal means by governments to punish journalists, or to chill them by calling for sanctions for violations of standards that are not clearly defined.

SEE ALSO: Accountability in Journalism; Ethics: Principles and Practices; Objectivity; Press Councils; Public Service Role of Journalism

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Chris Roberts is an associate professor and head of the graduate program with The University of Alabama's Department of Journalism and Creative Media. He worked for decades as a journalist before earning a doctoral degree from the University of South Carolina. He is a member of the Society of Professional Journalists' ethics committee and helped in the 2014 revision of its ethics code. He is coauthor (with Jay Black) of *Doing Ethics in Media: Theories and Practical Applications* (Routledge, 2011).