



Ten Ethical Principles for College Journalists

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1. Define a set of values.

Commentary

Journalists depend on social values like honesty, openness, and freedom of expression. The larger society, in turn, depends on journalists to define and act upon values designed to promote public understanding and civic participation.

Most journalists believe they are part of a profession committed to "the people's right to know." The "right to know" is meaningless, however, if falsehoods are perpetrated, individuals or groups demonized, or if titillation takes priority over education.

There is a difference between good journalism and bad journalism. That difference will be defined by standards that can be identified, debated, and affirmed.

The way journalism is practiced also shapes the character of the practitioners. The essayist Michel de Montaigne wrote that "I have no more made my book, than my book has made me." Journalists--especially young journalists forming the habits of their craft--need to consider whether their work will make them thoughtful or superficial; inquisitive or invasive; understanding or cynical. They mold their characters as they define their careers.

2. Tell the truth.

Commentary

Objective truth like flawless beauty is an illusive goal. Nonetheless, just as human beings pursue many aims that can never be fully achieved, it remains a worthy endeavor for journalists to commit themselves to trying to tell the truth.

Some philosophies proclaim the truth that truth is an illusion. That inherently contradictory view would be the end of journalism. It leads to the conclusion that the only difference between writing propaganda and reporting news is the quality of deception.

A commitment to telling the truth does not preclude moral indignation. Indeed, telling the truth often promotes moral indignation. What skeptics about truth omit, and journalists must remember, is that



moral indignation can't exist without morality--including the morality associated with truth seeking and truth telling.

3. Respect human dignity.

Commentary

Journalists play an important public role constituting a "fourth estate." Even as public figures, however, journalists expect to be accorded some degree of privacy and treated with civility. What journalists expect for themselves they must accord to others, being especially wary of the temptation to humiliate or embarrass others for the superficial aims of providing entertainment.

4. Recognize the complexity of human nature.

Commentary

The full scope of the human personality can't be captured by phrases or labels. The description of aims or motives must be done with caution, recognizing the limits of any attempt to understand the contents of the human heart.

Anyone who wants to understand human motivation needs to consider human behavior. Pulitzer Prize winning author and scientist Rene Dubos described the contradictions and richness of human nature in his book *The God Within*:

Every perceptive adult knows he is part beast and part saint, a mixture of folly and reason, love and hate, courage and cowardice. He can be at the same time believer and doubter, idealist and skeptic, altruistic citizen and selfish hedonist. The coexistence of these conflicting traits naturally causes tension but it is nonetheless compatible with sanity. In a mysterious way, the search for identity and the pursuit of self-selected goals harmonize opposites and facilitate the integration of discordant human traits into some kind of working accord.

More than one observer has suggested a powerful tool designed to help journalists explore the complexities of human motivation and to enhance fairness in reporting. That tool is the simple question "*Why?*" Answered seriously, and reported accurately, responses to the question "why" add richness and texture to decisions or actions that otherwise seem inexplicable or one-dimensional.

5. Be distrustful of unchecked power.

Commentary



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Journalists in free societies perform the priceless service of helping to limit and disperse power. Power takes many forms, however. It is also exercised by journalists, who need to be as distrustful of unchecked power in themselves as they are in others.

Creative thought needs to be given to internal checks on media power. An example of an internal check is the "Reader's Guide" developed years ago by the *Stanford Daily*, inviting readers to point out errors and listing the "rights" available to individuals contacted by *Daily* reporters (e.g. "You can . . . refuse to comment, . . . speak off the record . . . [or] [a]sk the reporter to read back your quotes . . ."). By checking and limiting their power, journalists affirm a sense of responsibility to the larger society and give substance to the civic virtues they expect in others.

6. Foster a diversity of views.

Commentary

Evolution promotes diversity for a good reason: *diversity enhances life*. Newspapers or other media that become dominant voices in a community will enhance the life of that community by allowing a diversity of experiences and opinions to be heard.

Most newspapers print a limited selection of letters to the editor. Some cultivate diverse opinions on an "Op-Ed" page. *USA TODAY* recruits and publishes opposing views directly below editorials. The *Harvard Crimson* does the same when members of the editorial board disagree. College journalists, skilled in the use of electronic media, can also permit readers to post comments on stories online. Nonetheless, however undertaken, diversity is too important to be left to chance. Seeking out the most capable defenders of different or contrary views should be one of the highest priorities for journalists.

7. Challenge group think.

Commentary

Human beings are designed to work together. There are risks as well as benefits associated with that trait. The risk for journalists is that intellectual laziness will diminish personal initiative, invite plagiarism, and discourage the creativity that allows courageous individuals to see what groups sometimes miss.

8. Take time to listen and reflect.

Commentary



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The public doesn't benefit from prompt reporting of inaccurate information. Whatever the speed of the news cycle, journalists need to take time to listen. Disciplined listening encourages greater sharing of information and reduces the risks of group think.

Deep reflection probably isn't possible in the initial flow of events, but subsequent reporting and commentary will benefit from efforts to understand and foster creativity. A convergence of research now suggests that creative insight is usually associated with intense concentration and the experience of "timelessness" or "flow." Many journalists may be gregarious by nature, but the best journalists will also know the benefits of mindful solitude and reflection.

9. Encourage criticism and self-examination.

Commentary

Journalists understand the cleansing power of thoughtful criticism. They have much to gain by turning that power inward as well as outward.

The practice of any profession is improved by self-criticism. A good approach for journalists, suggested by Donald W. Shriver in the Spring/Summer 1998 issue of the *Media Studies Journal*, is for reporters to devote regular time in staff meetings to answering two questions: "How could I have done better" and "what do we mean by 'better?'"

10. Correct mistakes.

Commentary

Journalists lose their effectiveness when they forfeit their credibility. Trust can be maintained if journalists openly correct serious mistakes.

The credibility of the media rises and falls in proportion to its arrogance. One antidote for arrogance is an expanded "corrections" policy like that at the British newspaper *The Guardian*. Among other initiatives, *The Guardian* appointed a "reader's editor" who presides over a prominent daily report of corrections, and "writes a weekly column about the inner workings of the paper." "In a lot of papers," the *Guardian* "reader's editor" told *The New York Times*, "they see admitting a mistake as a sign of weakness. But if you feel you're producing a newspaper with an intelligent readership, why not treat them as intelligent?" Better advice for college journalists would be hard to find.