
Journalists are a notoriously libertarian bunch, forever championing their right to freedom of speech and adept at hiding behind bushes when their decisions are criticized. Unlike medicine or law, or many other professions, there are no recognized codes of behavior to guide individual journalists or media organizations in most parts of the world. Determining what to report, how to report it, and what ethical boundaries to draw in the process are all left to individual editors. Sometimes the results are positive. Sometimes they are horribly damaging. This book, by way of eight real-life case studies, is an attempt to explore journalistic decision-making and draw lessons from both good and bad judgments which were made along the way.

Sadly, in a book called “Thinking Clearly,” it doesn’t help when the second page of the introduction makes a muddle of a concept crucial to understanding what follows. Yet that is what happens in this volume, where James Carey manages to mix together a number of ethical theories and then proceeds to reject them all in favor of his own standard of morals. He draws an equivalency between the Golden Rule, the Categorical Imperative, and the greatest happiness of the greatest number, a spectacular mix-up of diverging ethical theories. Further, he proceeds to reject all of the above for his own version of ethics, whereby journalism is to be judged on the basis of how the consequences of stories ensure the vitality of such institutions as “a healthy judiciary, an effective legislature, a strong presidency, and a balance of powers among these institutions” (p. 3). All references, of course, are American.

What this introduction indicates is that journalistic ethics are often a matter of individual choice, somewhat akin to selecting your wardrobe each morning. Many journalists are not terribly capable of articulating what, if any, ethical precepts they follow in their decision-making. To some, it is simply a matter of following the gut, the accumulated wisdom of experience in the trenches. Unfortunately, the gut can often lead the body astray, particularly under the pressure of increasingly persistent journalistic deadlines.

The case studies in the book, all by different authors, provide a fascinating glimpse into the decision-making process of some major American stories of the last 50 years, from McCarthyism to Watergate to the 2000 presidential campaign. In each case, editors are presented with unique and vexing problems. Should they report unverified information as the deadline looms and the opposition is threatening to scoop them? Should they use unnamed sources who may have an axe to grind? Should they print damning indictments of American institutions, in the face of vehement denials? Should they temper their reporting because of the damaging consequences which might ensue? As in most books discussing ethics, there are no hard and fast answers. But the questions themselves are fascinating, and useful lessons can often emerge.

The New Orleans Times-Picayune case, involving a comprehensive series of articles on race relations in 1993, provides an example of controversial decision-making both internally and externally. The newspaper engaged its entire staff in examining the topic, creating suspicions between White and Black reporters, and anxiety for some readers. When staff suggested that the newspaper’s own racist past be examined as part of the series, management agreed. A big part of the series, which ran in six instalments totalling 105 pages, dealt with historical issues, which were considered crucial to understanding the current situation. Some reporters and many readers questioned whether that was journalism at all. In the end, the series provoked many people to think about what a newspaper’s obligations to its community were really all about, a fundamental question not usually posed in newsrooms devoted to reacting to the daily diet of murders, fires, accidents, and city hall meetings.
The Minnesota Basketball Cheating Case, a 1999 story in the St. Paul Pioneer Press, explored a newspaper's relationship to its community in a very different context. Through persistent digging, a young reporter uncovered a tale of academic cheating by members of the local college basketball team. The story went to press just as the team was preparing for a game in the all-important NCAA championships, resulting in the suspension of five players. The team lost, and many Minnesotans were quick to denounce the timing of the story. Then-governor Jesse Ventura waded into the controversy, calling the newspaper's actions despicable. The case raises interesting questions about how journalists should weigh the consequences of their stories, what attention should be paid to timing publication, and how such pressures can sometimes distort journalistic work.

One of the most fascinating chapters, and perhaps the most instructive from an ethical perspective, deals with the Columbine School shooting in 1999. By chronicling the decision-making process of the three major television affiliates as the story unfolded, the author exposes inherent weaknesses in modern newsgathering and invites readers to assess how coverage might have been done differently. In the excitement of going live to a school with gunmen still inside, some television outlets put teenagers on the air via cell phone without verifying who they were or whether they were telling the truth. One station did a live interview with a teenager who blurted out the name of an alleged gunman, with no other verification, while another outlet used the wrong photo of a shooter. In other cases, graphic pictures of victims were carried live before parents were notified that anything was going on. At the time, no one knew whether the gunmen inside had access to this live coverage, and indeed how it might be influencing the incident itself.

Following the shooting, a number of guidelines and policies were created for coverage of such stories. One outlet drew up a rigorous checklist to be followed before any caller is put on air live. And the Poynter Institute, which disseminates practical advice on journalistic ethical issues, created guidelines for interviewing juveniles and covering bomb threats in schools. A key component in the institute's advice is the consideration of consequences, and the desire to minimize harm wherever possible, while maintaining the journalistic duty of seeking truths and reporting them as fully as possible.

No textbook can ever instruct journalists on how to think clearly and act ethically in every situation. But journalists must always be mindful of their responsibilities, aware of their power and sensitive to the consequences of their work. That knowledge can be enhanced by studying how other journalists reacted in specific, high-pressure instances. In this regard, this book makes a useful contribution.

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