



Markkula Center
for Applied Ethics
at Santa Clara University

Journalism 101

Lily Evans '21

2020-21 Hackworth Fellow





3 Things to Know About Journalism

1. What is journalism, anyway?
2. Ethics & journalism
3. The First Amendment (aka: why lawmakers can't just pass laws to decide what journalists do)





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What is journalism, anyway?

- Many things! A few ways we might define journalism:
 - A genre of storytelling that represents and interprets events, experiences, issues judged as publicly important
 - Practices that “participate in bringing social reality into existence” (Carey, 1992)
 - Stories that introduce a primary issue with social and historical context through the lens of a set of characters/invested parties, which journalists use to provide detailed analysis
 - May include **opinion** pieces and **reporting** pieces - which often become difficult for audiences to distinguish on digital platforms





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Ethics in journalism - wait what's ethics?

- Ethical reasoning asks you to consider what you should do rather than what you can do
 - Sounds challenging. How do I do it? Is there a step-by-step framework I can use?
 - Yes! Check out [Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, “A Framework for Ethical Decision Making”](https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/a-framework-for-ethical-decision-making/) <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/a-framework-for-ethical-decision-making/>
 1. Recognize an ethical issue
 2. Get the facts
 3. Evaluate alternative actions
 4. Make a decision and test it
 5. Act and reflect on the outcome
- Ethics means reaching and justifying decisions based on moral grounds – not just personal preferences, efficiency, or strategic gain





OK, so we know what journalism is, we know what ethics is — but what are journalism ethics?

- Standards for reporting practices
 - Codes of ethics
 - Upholding the integrity of the profession means putting each of these principles into practice at every turn
- Procedures to figure out “the right thing to do”
 - Keeping in mind that coverage may have direct effects and indirect effects
- Criteria for assessing the quality of journalism
 - Quality is often measured by how aligned reporting is with serving the public’s need to know





Pillars of ethical journalism

- Journalism's first obligation is to the truth
 - Reporter's are tasked with verifying facts and challenging general assumptions to ensure that their information is both correct and in context
- Journalism's primary allegiance is to the public
 - Giving the public what they *need* in order to be informed; doesn't always align with what the public *wants*
 - The news media are the common leaders of public discussion, so the responsibility falls on them to provide a comprehensive forum for public criticism and compromise
- Serve as an independent monitor of power
 - Journalists are well-known for their watchdog role, which seeks to place a check on institutions of power (i.e. coverage of law enforcement agencies in the US during the BLM protests in May/June 2020)
- Strive to make the significant interesting and relevant
- Keep the news comprehensive and proportional





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Those are some tall pillars. If journalism matters so much, why aren't there laws that clearly state what journalists do and how they do it?

- Press freedom means that decision-making is left to the press, not imposed by lawmakers
- First Amendment of the United States Constitution - ratified in 1791
 - “**Congress shall make no law** respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or **abridging the freedom** of speech, or **of the press**; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”
 - In simpler terms, the First Amendment protects freedom of the press
 - With freedom comes responsibility - and with responsibility comes a need for ethical reasoning!





To recap...

1. What is journalism, anyway?

- Journalism is an attempt to represent events, issues, and lived experiences that matter

2. Ethics & journalism

- Ethics means doing what's *right*, not just what's easiest
- Ethical journalism seeks to serve the public (& what that means is contentious)

3. The First Amendment (aka: why lawmakers can't just pass laws to decide what journalists do)

- The First Amendment stipulates press freedom, which means that we are unlikely to resolve ethical issues in journalism through the legal system





Next up: Modern Media Structures

How have news media structures changed over time?

Why do people talk about 2008 as a turning point in journalism?

I get all my news through social media posts, partly because there is no local news outlet where I live - why is that?

