

Ethics and power in journalism

[Entertainment](#), [Journalism](#)



What Roles Do Ethics and Power Play in Journalism? For the most part, journalists have power that can hurt, instead of help citizen autonomy. The ways journalists treat their subjects and sources have generated much concern. The ethics of these two endeavors share much in common, because both use people in various ways to reach each others goals. The well-developed guidelines in research designed to protect research participants' autonomy, to guard against needless deception, and to recognize the special needs of vulnerable research participants have direct application to journalism. Christopher Meyers argues that the news media are ethically constrained by procedure, resulting in journalists asserting power inappropriately at the individual level, and unwillingly giving up moral authority institutionally and globally. In this paper I will discuss how journalists use power and the role that ethics plays in journalism. In particular, journalists have power at three levels: the micro level, as in relationships between reporters and news subjects or sources; the institutional or professional level, as in media impact on regional political or cultural agendas; and the social level, as in media contribution to establishing and maintaining ideology. Power by definition is the ability to implement one's agenda, often, though not always, by successfully manipulating others. The ability to implement one's agenda is seen through power, and directly linked to the promotion of autonomy; powerful agents have greater opportunity to act upon those choices they find important to the development of character. However, power can also be constructed to restrict others' similar choices; that is, power can be used to coerce or constrain, as well as to withhold information vital to autonomous decision

making. Power can also certainly be wielded to enhance others' well being or to severely damage it; one can, obviously, use position and authority to provide others with goods or to cause them great harm. Journalistic relationships can have mutual benefit, the journalist wants a good story and the subject or source wants to be presented in a good way or have her ideas widely and accurately discussed. But, such benefit is not essential to the interaction. Rather, the reality is closer to Ralph Barney's comprehensive view that, " Every interview is a power struggle." The journalistic relationship seems fundamentally to be at least grounded in each party's desire to satisfy his or her respective self-interest, but also being more or less wary of the other. Each may wish to remain in the other's good graces and may even care about the other's well being, but neither such goal is fundamental to the relationship, as it is in effective teaching, health care, ministry, and legal assistance. Agenda control clearly rests in the hands of the journalist. The journalist decides what stories to cover, how to cover them, how to characterize the various people and ideas. Although some norms dictate appropriate choices here, they are institutional norms, chosen by journalists, not by subjects and sources. Thus, determining what is newsworthy, let alone how it will be portrayed, lies in the hands of the journalist. Most important, is who controls the outcome. Journalists hold near complete control over what happens to a story: They edit it at their discretion, therefore giving it their own spin. Their editors or producers determine whether it will run and with what kind of play. Of course, it is also their printing press or television station. The cliché is now treated as a joke, but it is accurately revealing of who holds the power in these relationships. David

Kenamer feels that the ethical decisions required of media professionals often must be made with little time for reflection or discussion, under the pressures of deadlines, competing demands, and profit maximization. Given these circumstances, discussions of ethics in mass media often become autopsies of decisions already made, generated by complaints from the public or other media professionals. These discussions often seem so disconnected to theoretical and philosophical perspectives that little of lasting application can be seen. The need to protect human participants in research derives from two sources: the inherent inappropriateness of using people as a means to an end, and second, the need to maintain public support for such research. Both apply to journalism. Journalism must rely on the goodwill of the public to do its business, and to maintain this goodwill, journalism should be perceived as serving the public, not using it to sell papers, raise ratings, win prizes and awards, or advance careers. A number of writers have discussed the implicit contract between the public and the press, a contract that allows the press to engage in certain practices as long as such practices are perceived to be serving the public's interest. Kieran wrote: The point is that media freedom to intrude into privacy and to speak freely against politicians, celebrities, and all-comers is granted by society on the grounds that it has a watchdog function to fulfill. Take away the function, or where the news media as a whole fails to fulfill that function, and it is not clear that the news media have any right to behave in such a manner or if the price is one worth paying. Generally, ethics codes in journalism require that reporters identify themselves to their sources as reporters, with the clear implication that anything said to them could be used in a news story.

For example, the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics stated: "Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story." The Radio-Television News Directors Association code contained very similar wording. This knowledge allows sources and subjects to make a considered judgment as to how, or even whether, they will answer the reporter's questions. This requirement for journalists is remarkably similar in its intent to that of informed consent in research ethics. This simply means that research participants should know what they are getting into when they agree to participate in a research study, and they give their overt permission to the researchers to conduct the research on them. They should understand the methods to be used and the potential for harm that exists, both its probability and severity. Deception about a reporter's identity or true purposes or the surreptitious recording of sources or subjects may have their uses in news gathering as well as in social science research. As Bok made clear, every such action must be carefully considered, used only if other means are unavailable or ineffective, and in the pursuit of a very clear and worthwhile goal. Thus, some deception may be used in research if the research design requires it, the purpose is clearly worthwhile, and the harm thought to be minimal. Deception may be justified in journalistic investigations if, the information can't be gotten otherwise and the story is important by traditional news defining standards. In conclusion, it is clearly evident that journalists have power in mass media. Journalists have the ability to control the story and manipulate the source. When it comes to

ethics journalists often have been unwilling to accept responsibility for the effects of their stories on their subjects or sources, using concepts of news worthiness or the public's right to know to justify their actions and the harm they might cause. However, given the low esteem in which the news media are generally held by the very publics they rightly serve, the time to establish more critical thinking about the outcomes of their work is long past.

Based on these facts it is important to continue research on power and ethics in journalism. The foundation of which they are under must be changed in order to help society globally. Works Cited Babbili, Anantha, Bowers, Peggy, Meyers, Christopher. " Power, Ethics, and Journalism: Toward an Integrative Approach." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*; 2004: p. 223-246. Barney, Ralph. " Doing Ethics in Journalism." *A Handbook with Case Studies*; 1998. Bok, S. Lying. *Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*. New York: Pantheon; 1978. Bok, S. " Secrets. On the ethics of concealment and revelation." New York: Random House; 1983. Brislin, Tom. " Empowerment as a Universal Ethic in Global Journalism." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*; 2004: p. 130-137. Kennamer, David. " What Journalists and Researchers Have in Common About Ethics." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*; 2005: p. 77-89. Kieran, M. " A philosophical approach." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*; 1997. Radio-Television News Directors Association. [http://www. rtnda. org/ethics/ coe. shtml](http://www.rtnda.org/ethics/coe.shtml). *Journal of Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct*; 2004. Rao, Shakuntala, Seow Ting Lee. " Globalizing Media Ethics? An Assessment of Universal Ethics Among International Political Journalists." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*; 2005: p. 99-120. Society of Professional Journalists. [http://www. spj. org/ethics_ code. asp](http://www.spj.org/ethics_code.asp). *Journal of Code of Ethics*; 2004. Ward, Stephen. "

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