

# Professional Codes of Ethics

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# Laws vs. Ethics



# Laws vs. Ethics

- Simple way to think about it: **laws are about what you can do** and **ethics are about what you should do**
- Journalistic ethics important because there is no licensing system for journalists in the U.S.
  - Anyone can claim to be a journalist, unlike a doctor or lawyer
  - Some countries require journalists to be licensed by the government
- In lieu of licensing, **self-regulation is important for promoting good journalism** (and earning audiences' trust)



# A Spectrum for Ethics

- Deontological approaches: Emphasis on **the principles that drive the action**
  - Example: Kant's categorical imperatives (ethical duty is the same all of the time, with limited regard for consequences)
- Teleological approaches: Emphasis on **the result of the action**
  - Example: Utilitarianism (ethical act is the one that brings the greatest good to the greatest number of people)
- There are many approaches in between
  - Examples: situational ethics, multiple duties, virtue ethics

# SPJ Code of Ethics

- Journalists in the U.S. consider professional codes of ethics to be very important to their work
- Different subfields of journalism (and even journalistic outlets) have their own codes of ethics
- Most influential code for U.S. journalists is the [Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics](#), which has four main principles:
  - Seek truth and report it
  - Minimize harm
  - Act independently
  - Be accountable and transparent

Seek Truth and Report It

# Minimize Harm

- Journalists must balance the public's need for information against potential harm and discomfort
- Pursuit of news is not a license for intrusiveness
- Journalists should be compassionate and especially careful when dealing with vulnerable populations
- Journalists should avoid pandering to lurid curiosity and weigh privacy against the need for information
- Journalists should consider the long-term impacts of their work



Act Independently

# Be Accountable and Transparent

- Explain ethical choices and processes to audiences
- Acknowledge mistakes and correct them promptly and prominently
- Expose unethical conduct in journalism (including within one's own organization)
  - Protecting peers is often a selfish and unethical act that does not lead to better journalism

# Key Takeaways

- Ethics refer to the moral principles or values held or shown by an individual
- There are different philosophies for ethical decision-making, ranging from a focus on actions to a focus on outcomes, with many philosophies existing in between
- The SPJ Code of Ethics is the most prominent and influential code of ethics in U.S. journalism