

Ethics as a process, as a tool for making decisions.

What is your mission? What are your over-arching goals and imperatives?



- Report the truth
- Minimize harm
- Modeling for citizens, both process and result
- Giving citizens the information they need to govern themselves
- Holding government accountable; shining a light into dark places

How can you accomplish these goals? Break it down into steps.

What do you know? What do you have independent verification of? What don't you know, or cannot confirm?

What information do readers/viewers need?

What are your options? Put all options on the table before discerning which if any are viable, remembering that rarely is there one right answer, but many right answers (and many wrong ones).

Who are the stakeholders? Who are those likely to be affected by your decision? How will they be affected, depending on your course of action?

Think about explaining your decision-making process to your readers/viewers. Explain how you determined what to do, and what the tradeoffs were. Transparency builds trust. And thinking through how you would explain it ensures that you've been deliberate in making your decision. We work for the public, so we are accountable to that public. What we decide, therefore, should be publicly justifiable.

The key is to have a process BEFORE crisis hits, to anticipate ahead of time and get some practice weighing the values that collide in ethical dilemmas, typically right before deadline or it's time to go home.

It's OK to listen to your gut, but don't let that gut reaction fool you into thinking that you know the answer before working through the issues, considering the guidelines, hearing diverse points of view, developing options. And don't go it alone. You need several people with different perspectives, including at least one from a devil's advocate or contrarian point of view. The line between good gut decision-making and fickle instinct is a fine one, if it exists at all.

It's OK to consider the interests of the news organization – like the bottom line, our credibility, etc. But self-serving concerns can't drive the decision, and they can't count more than the interests of the public we serve or the people who might be hurt by our decision.

So, with these provisos articulated, here is a process for working through difficult ethical situations and scenarios. This is a skill, in other words, and skills can be learned . . . by anyone, by everyone.

Step One: Define the goal

What do you need to decide, and when do you need to decide it?

Step Two: Start with the facts

What do you know for sure? What has happened so far? What pieces of the puzzle are still missing? What are our assumptions? How might you be wrong? What are the facts from the point of view of those who might be harmed by our decision? Do you know enough to make this decision now? What else do you need to know?

Step Three: Know the journalistic purpose

What story do our readers, viewers, listeners need? Why are you obliged to report this information? What are your journalistic obligations in this case?

(If the dilemma doesn't involve gathering information, reporting or content decisions, skip to the next step.)

Step Four: Consider the ethical principles at stake

- Serve the public interest
- Protect journalistic independence
- Inform the public
- Maximize truth
- Minimize harm

Ethical, social principles are gleaned from the works of Immanuel Kant, W.D. Ross, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and Bernard Gert. Learn more about the principles that seem relevant before proceeding to Step Five, if there is time, of course.

Step Five: Identify the principles that are in tension with one another

- Serving the public interest
- Protecting independence
- Informing the public
- Jeopardizing life
- Minimizing harm
- Acting justly
- Helping those in immediate need
- Keeping promises
- Respecting people
- Not deceiving

Put a check mark beside those that are in conflict with one another. Usually – almost always – it is a conflict or tension or collision of at least two of these values that gives rise to the ethical dilemma in the first place. Weed out those principles that are not applicable so you can focus on those few that are most relevant.

Step Six: Identify the stakeholders

Who are the stakeholders?

- Sources
- Subjects
- Families of subjects or sources
- Institutions
- News organization
- Other news organizations
- Person or people making the decision
- Journalist involved
- Others?

This is not an all-inclusive list, just one to provoke or inspire a more thorough list. Think of specific names and groups in or for your case.

Which of the stakeholders are most affected?

Which of the stakeholders are most vulnerable?

Step Seven: Identify your options

What alternative courses of action are possible? Try to generate at least three options.

Option 1: ??

Option 2: ??

Option 3: ??

Step Eight: Evaluate your options

Look at the principles you listed as most relevant in this case, in Step Five. Discuss the impact of each option on the most relevant principles at stake.

The stakeholders don't decide for you what you should do, but imagining their preferences can be useful, and it focuses you on minimizing harm.

Step Nine: Make a choice

All things considered, what's the best option? What can be done to reduce the cost or harm to a principle that is being outweighed in the choice? For example, if you chose to inform people of something that jeopardizes another's privacy, how can you reduce the impact on those whose privacy is being compromised? How can you minimize harm to vulnerable stakeholders, in other words?

Step Ten: Test your thinking

This is the last chance to question your decision. The last opportunity for devil's advocacy. Don't hold anything back. This is also the time to articulate your justification. Imagine being interviewed by, say, "60 Minutes." How will you explain to a television audience the decision your news organization made? Or, write a news story explaining your news organization's reasoning, whether you plan to publish it or not.

In your justification, fill in some of these blanks:

- We have decided to _____
- We reached the decision after weighing _____
- We also considered _____
- We think this decision best upholds the principle of _____
- We believe our obligation to _____ is outweighed in this case by or because _____
- To reduce damage or harm to _____, we will _____