Created in 1982 to support journalists from developing countries, the Foundation today embraces a wide range of educational, humanitarian and environmental causes and projects. These include:

**alertnet**
The online news and communications service for the international disaster relief community

**AIDFUND**
Fast support for aid agencies in the hours immediately following the onset of natural disasters

**educational projects**
Projects which advance literacy, IT and other skills

**Community projects**
Diverse practical and financial support for communities around the world in response to needs identified by Reuters employees

**JOURNALISM TRAINING**
A wide range of university fellowships and short training courses for journalists
For more than 20 years, Mona Megalli was a globe-trotting journalist whose passion, integrity and commitment to news were as inspiring as her warm personality, sense of humour and love for her work. She was proud of being a journalist, and of following in the footsteps of her mother, who had also been a trail-blazing journalist several decades earlier. When Mona was diagnosed with cancer in 2004, she was determined to pass on her passion, respect and love for journalism to a new generation of reporters.

Mona was born and raised in Egypt, but moved to the United States when she was 16, becoming a unique blend of East and West. She spent many years working as a reporter in Europe, the United States and the Middle East, retaining strong roots in the region. Her many friends and colleagues all over the world remember her endearing combination of wit, charm and fierce competitiveness. Her compassion and warmth touched countless lives. When Mona learned she was sick, she often spoke of wanting to leave behind a legacy for journalists in the Middle East. She believed free and fair journalism was a critical part of society and deserved deep respect. She wanted young women and men to pick up where she left off, bringing unparalleled professionalism and ethical standards to this difficult profession and continually raising the bar.

When Mona died on February 3, 2007, she dedicated a fund to the promotion of journalism ethics, focused on the region where she was born and which she cared about so deeply. Mona believed solid professional values and ethics were at the centre of good journalism, and gave reporters the enthusiasm and energy to keep digging for the truth. Her fund will enable Thomson Reuters Foundation to conduct ethics training for journalists throughout the Arab World, inspiring them with the same ideals that earned Mona so many promotions and so much respect throughout her career.

This handbook, written in accordance with the journalistic principles practised by the international news agency Reuters where Mona worked, was made possible by her fund, and is designed to provide advice and guidance on journalism ethics in the Arab World and across the globe.

It is not intended to provide answers to all ethical challenges, but rather to serve as a guide on these complex issues and as food for thought for everyone who loves journalism.

The handbook was written by Paul Holmes, the Reuters Global Editor for Political & General News from 2002 to 2007 and an Ethics Fellow of the Poynter Institute for Journalism Studies. It derives in large part from the Handbook of Reuters Journalism, which Holmes conceived and compiled.

Caroline Drees, Thomson Reuters

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INTRODUCTION

No two news organisations have precisely the same code of ethics, just as the laws and customs that govern our lives and work vary from country to country.

Ethics stems from the investigation of the intentions and consequences of our actions. It is not a science. It rests on our experience and on the principles and values of the societies in which we grow up and grow wise. Nor is it just about right and wrong. If things were that simple, we could develop a universal set of rules for journalists.

Ethics comes into play precisely when the rules run out, when a reporter needs to weigh the conflicting considerations of seeking out and telling the truth against the impact of that truth-telling. When, for example, is it appropriate to identify the race of the subject of a news story? How should a journalist handle information that could put a person’s life at risk? What should a business reporter do if the CEO of a company agrees to be interviewed only on condition that he can approve the quotes?

There often can be more than one right answer to the many tough questions that reporters and editors face all the time. This handbook won’t provide the answers. They can come only from you. The handbook is not intended as an exhaustive guide to ethical journalism. It would be foolish even to try to catalogue every situation in which ethical issues arise. It would also be impossible. Instead, it examines situations in which difficult issues arise and seeks to help you learn how to resolve those issues ethically.
Reporters play an important role in a democracy as the independent watchdogs of government, business and other political, social and financial institutions. Their primary functions are to expose and educate. The news media acts as a buffer and a bridge between the government and the public. The reporter can explain government decisions and actions to the public and pass the public view back to government.

A reporter is best able to fulfill these important functions in a society that values and protects the freedom of the press. In societies where that is the case, the reporter has a role in:

- Explaining economic, social and political trends
- Scrutinising the work of the government, the courts and business to highlight failures and successes
- Rooting out corruption and the abuse of power
- Exposing official negligence or incompetence
- Giving a voice to sectors of society without one
- Educating the public about the electoral process
- Explaining complex issues that affect the way we live
- Serving as a representative of the reader, viewer or listener who cannot be there
- Entertaining the reader in a responsible way, without doing harm

Because the journalist’s mission is a crucial one, it comes with great responsibility. For people to have faith in information about events in their own community or country and around the world, they must be able to trust the reporters and editors who produce the news to be independent and fair and to act with integrity.
JOURNALIST groups and news organisations in each country have their own codes of conduct, with some details varying according to local conditions and customs. At Reuters, one of the few global news organisations, the values of ethical journalism are enshrined in a document known as the Trust Principles. Among these principles are independence, integrity and freedom from bias. These principles are the essence of good journalism. They are values that can be found in ethical approaches to almost any issue a reporter or editor is likely to face.

There are also 10 “ absolutes” of journalism at Reuters, which are common to good codes of conduct.

THE 10 “ABSOLUTES” STATE THAT JOURNALISTS:

1. Always hold accuracy sacrosanct
2. Always correct an error openly
3. Always strive for balance and freedom from bias
4. Always reveal a conflict of interest to a manager/senior editor
5. Always respect privileged information
6. Always protect their sources from the authorities
7. Always guard against putting their opinion in a story or editorialising
8. Never fabricate or plagiarise
9. Never alter a still or moving image beyond the requirements of normal image enhancement
10. Never pay a source for a story and never accept a bribe.

PRACTISING ETHICAL JOURNALISM

Photographers look at a man burned and beaten during violent clashes in Reiger Park, Johannesburg. Siphiwe Sibeko. 2008
Every day, reporters and their editors take a whole host of decisions. Some are “no-brainers.” Others cause us to pause and ask questions of ourselves and of those around us. These are usually decisions that have an ethical dimension. They require us to put different considerations on the scale and balance them against each other so we can come up with the best answers and the way forward.

There are two types of decision that give us pause for thought. One is the “right or wrong” decision. The other involves taking a decision that could have several “right” answers.

A “right or wrong” decision is the easiest to resolve. In essence, if something is illegal, morally wrong or against the code of conduct in our profession, we should not do it. A good example is fabrication. To invent details or quotes for a story or to pretend you were somewhere when you were not there is wrong. We all know that, so the answer is simple: you don’t do it.

Reaching a decision is much more difficult when there is more than one outcome that could be the “right” answer. These decisions involve competing considerations and are true ethical dilemmas. An example of this is in the case of a graphic photograph. Here, the journalist has to assess whether readers need to see the image in order to understand the story and whether that outweighs the distress the photograph might cause. There is no “right” answer in a case like this. Being aware of the issues and discussing them leads to better journalism.
TAKING ETHICAL DECISIONS – II

Guides to ethical decision-making provide various frameworks for resolving ethical dilemmas. The first step is always to examine the issue and define it.

If the issue can be defined as “right or wrong” it is not a true ethical dilemma and the problem can usually be resolved without further consideration. If the issue can be resolved in several ways that are “right”, consider various courses of action and assess them by asking the following questions:

- What would the world be like if everyone behaved the way I now propose to do?
- What do the laws, religious tenets or moral codes that govern our behaviour suggest I do?
- Is there a compromise, or middle path, that will work for everyone involved?
- What course of action do I think would bring about the greatest good for the greatest number of people?
- Am I framing the dilemma too narrowly, so that I am missing some possible courses of action? Challenge the premise.
- How would I feel if I were the subject of the news story, or one of the people affected by the decision I am taking? Put yourself in their shoes.

Don’t let yourself be rushed into a decision; sometimes doing nothing, for example by not writing the story, is an option. It is good to have a contrarian spirit in the room when decisions are being talked through, to give an alternative point of view.

Finally, once you have decided on a possible course of action, there is the “front page test” or the “smell test”. Step back and run your decision past gut feeling. Ask whether you would be able to defend your decision if there was a story about it on the front page of tomorrow’s newspaper.

TAKING ETHICAL DECISIONS – III

So how does this happen when you are racing to meet a deadline, or know that your rivals are also onto the story? Here are a few ways to ensure that you are not overwhelmed while under pressure:

- Even in the heat of a newsroom, there are usually a few precious moments that you can use to review your options and make sure that the route you choose is one you can defend. This is the “take 10 seconds” rule. Never allow competitive pressures or a deadline to stand in the way of a considered decision. Journalism is strewn with examples of reporters who acted in haste and repented at leisure.

- “What do I know?” and “What do I need to know?” are the first questions you should ask yourself when faced with an ethical dilemma. Often, the answer to your dilemma will be to do more reporting in order to stand up your story. Unless you ask yourself these two questions, you risk rushing to publication with an incomplete story. If you conclude that you need more information, your story will be stronger.

Thoughtless reporting can occur when the excitement of getting a story overshadows the dispassionate consideration of the elements that go to make up a good story. An obvious example is in reporting about people. Asking “What is my journalistic purpose?” can, for example, guard against reporting a person’s religion when it has no relevance to the story and thereby avoid causing harm to other followers of that faith.
TAKING ETHICAL DECISIONS – IV

A Consider the following situations and decide if there is more than one “right” answer. Involve colleagues and discuss your reasons. You can also use examples from your own experience.

1) You are covering a conference of regional finance ministers. On the day you are expecting to receive the final communiqué, you see papers poking out from under the doors of bedrooms at the ministers’ hotel. The papers could be a draft of the communiqué. Do you take one?

2) Your newspaper has a policy that journalists should not accept gifts from sources. One night, you overhear a young colleague who has worked in the newsroom for six months talking on the telephone with a company spokesman. She is saying: “Here is my home address where you can send the necklace.” Do you report this to your editor?

B Consider various outcomes for the following situations. Involve colleagues and discuss your reasons. You can also use examples from your own experience.

1) The foreign ministry press office offers you an interview with the minister but says you can only ask about relations with the United States and must allow the ministry to vet the minister’s quotes before publication. What do you do?

2) You are interviewing the CEO of your country’s biggest airline. He leaves the room for a moment to take a telephone call and you see a document on his desk that says the airline will file for bankruptcy. This is totally unexpected. What do you do?
Conflicts of interest arise when an individual’s personal or financial interests compete in some way with the person’s professional duties. It is highly likely in the course of any journalist’s career that you will face a conflict of interest. The circumstances in which these conflicts arise can be as unexpected as they are common. They can involve your finances, your personal beliefs and political persuasions, your loyalty and obligations towards family and your relationships with friends, colleagues and news contacts.

The most important feature of a conflict of interest is that it can compromise your ability to act impartially and honestly as a journalist. Sometimes you and your employer are confident that the conflict of interest is not material to your work but often the mere perception of a conflict is enough to undermine the trust of the reader, viewer or listener in the integrity of your work.

The best way to deal with a conflict of interest is to avoid it entirely. The next best way, and essential in any case where a journalist believes there may be a conflict of interest, is to disclose it – to your supervisor and, if material, to your audience.

This section examines some of the more common conflicts of interest that occur in journalism. It offers advice on how to deal with them and looks at ways that codes of ethics seek to deal with such conflicts.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST – II

Journalists who cover publicly quoted companies and the financial markets need to be especially sensitive to financial conflicts of interest. If you, or a close relative, own shares in the company that you are covering, or in the industry you follow, it can create a perception of bias and self-interest. News organisations often require journalists to dispose of holdings in companies or industries they cover. Senior editors at many news outlets also are now expected by their employers to file voluntary annual statements of their investments as a signal of transparency. Business columnists are required to state in their column whether they have interests in the companies or markets they are writing about.

Finally, journalists often receive material non-public information about companies, such as embargoed releases on earnings. To take advantage of this information for personal financial gain is insider trading and is usually illegal.

Politics is another area where conflicts of interest can arise. It is also important for your audience to know that you are not influenced by your politics in what you report and that you cover the news in a way that is fair to all sides. Something as simple as posting a poster in a window of your house supporting a particular candidate in an election to the city council can undermine how your audience views you if you cover the city council. The simplest way to avoid these conflicts is not to be politically active. If you are, let your editor know and agree what areas you should avoid covering.
CONFLICTS OF INTEREST – III

Many publications and broadcasters expect their journalists and editors to put the interests of their own news outlet first, above those of other news organizations. That’s why media employers often prohibit staff from doing other paid work, or require them to obtain permission to ensure the activity does not present a conflict. For example, there would be a real conflict of interest if a Reuters journalist also worked for a rival news agency!

Many reporters hold strong convictions about the public interest issues on which they report, particularly if they specialize in an issue. They should take special care not to allow their opinions to unbalance the stories they write, or to avoid reporting contrarian views. Employers also have their own obligations, of course, and unfortunately some publishers can put inappropriate demands on their journalistic staff. You might be asked, for example, to write a story about a prominent politician in a certain way because he is a good friend of the publisher, or you may be told not to write the story at all if it could be damaging to the publisher’s friend. A journalist’s first duty is to the truth. But demands like these present real ethical dilemmas. Resisting them might damage career prospects or lead to dismissal. If you face such a conflict, think carefully how you can overcome it and consult people you trust – inside and outside your newsroom.

Finally, readers and viewers need to know whether what they are seeing is independent, unbiased news or PR. “Advertorials” and “video news releases” from PR agencies or official bodies should always be clearly labeled as such and not presented or disguised as news. And care needs to be taken to ensure that advertising, in the way it is placed, does not influence news content.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST – IV

Consider the following situations and decide if they present a conflict of interest. Discuss your reasons with colleagues and decide how you might resolve the conflict. You can also use examples from your own experience.

1) You are the consumer news editor and your marketing department calls to say that a leading electrical appliance retailer wants to place a half-page ad in the newspaper. The only condition is that no stories about the retailer’s competitors can appear on the same page or the facing page. Do you agree?

2) You work for the leading local newspaper, where you have broken a big story about corruption on the city council. The news director at your national TV station calls and invites you to appear on the weekly current affairs show to talk about the story. He offers you payment. What do you do?

3) Your investments include $50,000 in shares in your country’s second biggest bank. You’ve done well in your job covering the transport industry and now your editor offers you a promotion to the financial services beat. Do you tell your editor about your shares, sell the stock, do both those things, or do nothing?

4) There’s a national election in your country and you need to decide whom to assign to cover the main opposition party. One of your sports reporters is the daughter-in-law of the leader of that party. She has great access to him because her husband is the party leader’s only son. Do you assign her the beat?
Good sources are among the most important resources a news organisation has. Yet the relationship with a source can be one of the most fraught a journalist has. That’s because there is a risk that sources can exert undue influence over what journalists report.

Relationships with sources need to be professional, respectful, fair and built on trust. Getting too close to a particular source can skew your view of the story, so it’s important to cultivate sources on all sides of a story or issue. Sources, too, need to know that a relationship is founded on trust.

Most codes of ethics advise journalists only to use confidential, unnamed sources when the information is in the public interest and efforts to obtain it on the record have failed. Even when your source has to remain confidential, it is often possible to tell readers how a source knows something, or what authority the source has.

“A cabinet minister who has seen the strategy document”, for example, does not reveal a source’s identity but it does give the reader more information with which to assess how credible the story is than the vague “official source”.

Divulging confidential information can harm a source in many ways. It can even cost lives. So a journalist and a news outlet must be able to assure a source that they will resist attempts to force them to reveal a source’s identity. That does not mean you should not tell your editor who your source is, though you should disclose that information only to those in your news organisation who clearly need to know.
DEALING WITH SOURCES - II

Sources often try to influence what a journalist reports. This can take many forms – from gifts to entertainment, to travel and hospitality or favours for a journalist’s relatives. You should decline and discourage such offers because there is no such thing as a “free lunch”. It usually requires a favour in return. If the public finds out that a journalist is receiving favours, it undermines trust in a journalist’s independence.

In some societies, it is customary to offer gifts on festive occasions, such as to mark the Eid or Christmas. Refusing such gifts can cause offence but if you do have to accept one, make sure it is of minimal value and that your editors know about it. Journalists, of course, should always refuse payment for stories. That’s just wrong.

Newsrooms usually allow staff to keep complimentary books, DVDs or CDs that they receive for review, since they’re really like press releases. However, you should not sell these for gain. Consider donating them to a charity. Similarly, it is quite acceptable to take a press seat at a sports event or concert you are covering. You shouldn’t abuse your status as a journalist, though, to gain free admission if you aren’t attending professionally.

The cost of covering a story is another area where news organisations need to be careful. It is always best to pay your own way, rather than accept hospitality. The same goes for holidays. If your news organisation pays for your lunch with a source, you don’t have any obligation to that person. In cases where a reporter must depend on military, government or other private transport to reach the scene of the story, it is standard practice in some parts of the world to insist on paying a fair share of the cost.

DEALING WITH SOURCES - III

It is quite common for sources to ask to “approve” your story or “vet” the quotes you are going to use before you publish them. This situation is a tricky one, because it’s quite frequently accepted by news organisations in many countries. However, this practice too can undermine integrity and public perceptions of the independence of the media. As journalists, we should try hard to discourage it.

Usually, you should resist showing a complete, unpublished story to a source. You, and your news organisation, should always retain ultimate control of what is or isn’t published. With quotes, it is not so black and white. You may want to check the accuracy of a person’s remarks before running an interview – although a digital or tape recorder and careful written notes are the best way to do this.

The content may be so technical and complex that you feel you need to double-check. You should first clarify with your supervisor whether you can do this. You should also make clear to the source that you will only change inaccuracies. Resist allowing the source to veto what you report or to change the meaning. Better not to issue a story than to compromise.

Finally, rigorous sourcing is essential to credibility. Presenting one source as two, or allowing a source to say one thing on the record and the opposite off the record – a practice known as “double dipping” – deceives the public. And if you pick up a story from another news organisation, attribute it. Make sure the public does not think you gathered the information or quotes if someone else did.
DEALING WITH SOURCES - IV

Here are some scenarios you may come across in your dealings with sources. Discuss how you would handle them with your colleagues, or talk about cases you have experienced yourself.

1) A source at the local refinery who you have met a handful of times invites you and your spouse to spend a weekend with him and his spouse at a beach resort. “I thought it would be nice to get to know each other better socially,” the source says. What would you do?

2) The labour minister unexpectedly agrees to meet strikers who are crippling the steel industry in a city 500 miles (800 km) from the capital. Four hours before his flight is due to leave, the ministry telephones to say it is offering seats to the media. It says the minister will talk to reporters on the return flight. Do you accept the offer and on what, if any, terms?

3) A famous theatre company is coming to your city to perform a children’s show during the forthcoming holiday. You are assigned to cover the opening performance. Organisers offer you four complimentary seats so you can bring your family. What do you do?

4) You ask to interview the district police chief about an investigation under way into a spate of armed robberies. The press office tells you that you can have the interview exclusively as long as you agree to include certain information that investigators want made public to help with the enquiry and on condition that you show them the story before it is published. How do you respond to the condition?
DEALING WITH THE AUTHORITIES

Journalists have a duty to report the truth and seek ways to break news of major public interest. They also need to act within the law, which does not mean they should not challenge it by legal means. This may be the case in places where censorship applies or laws are used to suppress the truth. There may be exceptional circumstances when a story is so overwhelmingly in the public interest that a publication might need to consider whether it should break the law in order to get the story. Such a situation usually arises when all other legitimate means of obtaining the information have been exhausted. A decision to pursue this route will only be taken at the highest level of your news organisation and is never taken lightly. Lawyers should be consulted.

In the course of their work, journalists often obtain sensitive information. They should obtain information legitimately and not under false pretences. Stealing data or documents, telephone tapping and computer hacking are all illicit methods of obtaining information and will invariably overshadow the news you gather if exposed. They may also result in criminal action against you or your publication.

For the purposes of straight news reporting, journalists should not employ methods popularly associated with “undercover” journalism, such as the use of hidden cameras or posing as someone other than a reporter. Imagine how your publication will be perceived by readers if, for example, you run a report with information that you got by posing as a police officer. Could you defend that? If you are engaged in investigative reporting, check out some of the codes of ethics that exist to guide journalists through some of the pitfalls of this type of journalism.

DEALING WITH THE AUTHORITIES

A police officer orders a foreign journalist to stop filming at a police registration centre in Colombo.

DEALING WITH THE AUTHORITIES – III

Sensitive information that journalists obtain in the course of their work can have a bearing on national security, on a criminal investigation or on a civil lawsuit. You, or your news organisation, may be asked by the authorities to suppress certain information, in a story about a murder or during a conflict for example, or you may be asked to hand over unpublished material to support a prosecution. You might also be asked to reveal the confidential source of a leak from a government ministry or you may be subject to censorship.

As a rule of thumb, news organisations resist requests to hand over unpublished material and decline to reveal the identities of confidential sources. They will use all legal means available to try not to do so. There are good reasons for these principles. They preserve a publication’s independence and integrity, reinforce the relationship of trust that needs to exist with confidential sources and can help protect staff from danger.

However, there are no easy answers to any of these challenges and each case has to be considered on its own merits and in its own context. For example, it may be appropriate not to publish the names of soldiers killed in a training accident until their families have been informed. But what if the authorities ask you not to report details of how the soldiers were killed? That could be an attempt at a cover-up. If you face situations such as these, you should consult your editors and involve your news organisation’s legal department.

DEALING WITH THE AUTHORITIES – II

Another sensitive area concerns material from organisations that use violence as a means to an end. It is important to guard against your news organisation becoming a publicity vehicle for such groups. You need to be sure that what you publish is newsworthy and that you can defend it as being in the public interest.

Journalists should not put the news above the protection of lives – so if, for example, your newsroom receives a telephone warning that a bomb has been placed in a shopping mall, your first obligation is to alert the authorities so they can check the claim and clear the area if necessary. Indeed, the threat may not be news at all if the warning turns out to be a hoax.

Statements, telephone calls and other messages claiming responsibility for violent acts must be handled with great care. Notes, and if possible a recording, should be made of all such communications. If a statement or telephone call cannot be authenticated as coming from a recognised group or comes from an unknown group, treat it with grave reserve.

There are, of course, grey areas in all of this. Environmental activists may call to let you know they are planning a spectacular protest (that may involve breaking the law) and invite you to come and film it. Or a group holding foreign hostages may give you exclusive access to an interview with them. In deciding how to proceed, always consult your editors and remember at all times that it is not your job as a journalist to take sides.
DEALING WITH THE AUTHORITIES – IV

Consider the following situations and decide how you would deal with them. Discuss with colleagues or present examples from your own experience.

1) The head of your country’s employers’ organisation has been kidnapped by a revolutionary group. It has threatened to kill him unless the government releases all imprisoned members of the group. A man claiming to be a photographer says he can get you pictures of the hostage for $10,000. Do you buy them?

2) Two confidential sources tell you that the CEO of your country’s biggest steel company is facing a no-confidence vote from members of the board. Both show you documents but the company will not comment. You publish and the CEO obtains a court order requiring you to identify your sources. What do you do?

3) You discover that the explosives used in a refinery bombing are of the same type as those used in two earlier bombings claimed by an anarchist group. Police ask you not to publish these details because they could prejudice their investigation. Do you agree?

4) Your country is at war and a fighter plane has crashed in enemy territory. A military spokesman you know well tells you off the record that the pilot is alive. He asks you to publish a story saying the pilot is dead to improve the prospects for a rescue mission. He says that if you agree, you’ll get the rescue story as an exclusive. Do you accept the deal?
All reporting, in one way or another, is about people. Journalists should not shy away from reporting reality, however painful, but should also seek to minimise any harm to the public through their actions. The people who make the news are vulnerable to the impact of the stories about them. In extreme cases, their lives or their reputations could be at risk. When covering people in the news, journalists should avoid causing needless pain and offence and treat victims of trauma with sensitivity. Children are particularly vulnerable and many countries have laws that prohibit identifying children below a certain age or taking photographs without permission.

References to gender, ethnicity, appearance, religion, age, and sexual orientation can add context and value to stories but they should not be used gratuitously. It is important to think carefully about the journalistic purpose of reporting these attributes. Language should be neutral and natural — and the best stories “show” rather than “tell”. The reader should be able to judge people with the facts and the quotes in the story, not with the journalist’s interpretations.

Crime and conflict reporting require particular care with reporting race and religion. Any such information must be strictly relevant and journalists need to be mindful of the risk of implying guilt by association. For example, a story about an attack carried out in the name of a religion should not cast suspicion on all followers of that creed. People who resort to violence are a minority in any religion. Finding the proper terms for such groups can be difficult and journalists need to strive for precision in their descriptions.
DEALING WITH PEOPLE - II

A story about a traumatic event can be covered with great impact by focusing on the experiences of the victims. At the same time, reporters must avoid adding to interviewees’ peril or distress. Journalists also need to remember that people who have had a painful emotional or physical experience do not always remember details accurately. They may exaggerate some elements or erase others from their account. It is therefore important to cross-check details as far as possible.

Interviewees must be aware that their comments and identities may be widely publicised. Don’t disguise the fact that you are a journalist when you talk to people. In reporting on suffering, a restrained style is often the most effective. In matters of taste, whether in descriptions of violence or the use of language, the priority should be accurate, comprehensive reporting. Exercise judgment to avoid appearing gratuitously offensive or titillating. Ask yourself how you would feel if you were the subject of your story.

The best way to avoid causing harm to the public is by providing the complete facts, all sides of an argument, and the relevant context in neutral prose. Keep digging and questioning if the facts are not yet there. When access to information is restricted, or a piece of the puzzle is missing, say so. With coverage of crime, security and medical problems, aim to offer ample context to help readers assess the risk to their own health or safety, mindful of the danger of inflating public fears through sensationalism. Beware of instilling false hope with talk about “miracle cures” and “scientific breakthroughs”.
DEALING WITH PEOPLE – IV

1) A bar which is popular with foreigners has been bombed. Police tell you that they have detained a man who is being questioned but has not been charged. They tell you the man’s name, age and whether he is a member of your country’s minority religion. Which of these details would you report? What else would you want to know?

2) A major cement maker announces that it has named a woman as the new chief executive officer. She is one of the first female CEOs in your country. She has three children aged four to 12 and her husband is a professor of music at the local university. How much of that is newsworthy, in what context and why?

3) A popular singer has been campaigning to ban the sale of alcohol to youths under the age of 21. A police report comes in revealing that a 19-year-old woman has been charged with drunk driving. The report identifies her as the singer’s daughter. Do you report this? How? Who would you want to interview?

4) You are assigned to cover a trial for sexual abuse of a teacher in a small village school with only one kindergarten class that has eight students. The judge bans publication of the defendant’s name. In court one day, you meet a mother and her son. She tells you her son was in the man’s class. Do you interview the boy?

DEALING WITH PEOPLE – III

Journalists should always proceed with caution when interviewing children, especially trauma victims and children involved in criminal proceedings. Description of the suffering of children may suffice to convey the drama. When you decide to talk to a child directly, make sure you are satisfied that the interview is crucial to the telling of an important story. The overriding concern must be to avoid exposing a minor to harm.

A reporter will often need the permission of the appropriate authority such as a parent, guardian or school authority to interview or photograph a child. There are severe restrictions on talking to children involved in criminal proceedings in most jurisdictions and in identifying minors in such cases. Remember that identifying adults involved in such cases can, in some circumstances, lead back to the child.

When covering celebrities or people who are newsworthy because of their profession, reporters and their editors should be satisfied that references to their personal lives are broadly relevant to their role, their policies or their chosen image.

Make sure you are familiar with the laws on privacy in your country and how they relate to journalism. Being a public figure should not make every aspect of someone’s life and every member of their extended family fair game. At the same time, public figures who bring their families or personal attributes into the media spotlight should expect to come under scrutiny in these areas. Finally, question your journalistic purpose when reporting the views of celebrities. Is it really news that your country’s top rock star has a certain political opinion?

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It is often said that the camera never lies and, to the extent that clichés are statements of the obvious, that may be true. But the camera can very easily deceive, misrepresent and mislead. Take a political demonstration. There may be only 50 people taking part in the protest. But if they all gather around a small circle in which they burn a flag or an effigy and photographers and camera operators are inside that circle, the resultant images can make it appear that the protest was actually quite large.

The basic journalistic principles of accuracy, integrity and fairness apply as much to the journalism of still and moving images as they do to print or audio journalism. If our journalistic purpose is to report the truth, then the images we use to do that must reflect reality. Digital manipulation is now so sophisticated that it is possible to distort images so radically that they can seriously mislead audiences or create a potential for news organisations and their audiences to be the victims of a hoax. For that reason, many newsrooms limit the use of digital manipulation software such as Photoshop to minor adjustments such as basic colour correction, sharpening and the removal of dust – the sort of work that could be done in a darkroom in the age of film processing. Other news organisations, such as Reuters, have gone further and issued very detailed guidelines. It is for each organisation to set its own policies but ethical use of digital enhancement techniques requires that the image should reflect reality.
The boundaries between news and advertising are blurring in the present landscape. It is important that these two areas remain distinct and cannot be confused by our audience. Video News Releases – short, professionally produced video “stories” provided by governments and companies – are increasingly common, as are photo headlines. Newsrooms need to think carefully about the issues associated with such material in deciding whether to use it. Is it reliable? Is it balanced? Are we getting the whole story? Are we using it to save money or because we cannot get access? How do we make clear to our audience that this is not material we have gathered ourselves?

And finally, graphic images of violence and trauma are inevitable in journalism. Different news organisations will apply different standards to where the boundaries lie and what needs to be seen in order to be understood. Yet others will pixillate areas of images that they consider too graphic, or not show such images at all, or publish them only with a warning to the audience. In all cases, as with all the difficult decisions journalists face, the best decision is one you can defend.

In many countries, it is all too common for photographers to “stage” images. At the most innocuous level, “staging” involves asking a politician to walk into a room for a “cutaway” shot during a broadcast interview or asking a gold medal winner at a sports event to kiss the medal. Such directed shots are conventions and are generally accepted as such by the public. Anything much beyond those conventions, however, risks drawing accusations of fabrication.

Many news organisations caution their photographers not to intervene in any way in a news image – for example by moving an object, including an object that was not in the image, or directing the subject of the image to take certain actions. Apart from commercial and studio photography, all of these actions are at odds with the truthful, accurate and objective portrayal of an event. Sequencing in moving images is another area where a distortion of reality might occur. A televised news report faces the challenge of showing viewers an event in a very limited time. Editors need to ensure that the order in which they display images does not substantially alter the depiction of the event.

Archive material also needs to be handled with care and labelled as such so as not to mislead the audience. It should not be presented as images of an actual event itself. And creating images using techniques like slow motion or a speeding up of events to illustrate the passage of time are not generally acceptable on news assignments. Save them for feature projects – and label them clearly.

ETHICS AND VISUAL JOURNALISM – II

ETHICS AND VISUAL JOURNALISM – III

Vertical stacking, a Japanese video journalist, was shot by soldiers as they fired to disperse the crowd of protestors in Myanmar.

Adrees Latif. 2007.
ETHICS AND VISUAL JOURNALISM - IV

Consider the following situations and discuss with colleagues the issues you see and how you would handle them. You can also use examples from your own experience.

1) News comes in that a plane has crashed at your local airport. You have footage of a previous crash involving the same airline at the same airport three years earlier. Do you run this footage while your crew is getting to the scene? If so, what do you tell viewers?

2) You have been taking photographs of the soccer cup final and your only picture of the winning goal has someone’s elbow in the frame. Your editor wants a telling image from the game on the front page. Do you remove the elbow using Photoshop?

3) You are at the scene of a house fire where all the members of a prominent local family were killed. You spot two rival photographers placing a child’s toy truck under a fallen, charred ceiling beam. You know this will make a great photo. Since you did not stage it, will you take it? What else would you do?

4) An earthquake destroys several villages in a remote area of your country. You and other journalists can’t get there but a rescue team that has been in by helicopter offers you dramatic, exclusive footage of survivors. Do you accept it? If so, do you tell viewers that the images were provided by a rescue team?

The following English language web sites have useful guidance:

- ReutersLink
  - ReutersLink.org
  - The journalism training site of the Thomson Reuters Foundation with links to useful reporting guides and other resources, including the Handbook of Reuters Journalism.

- The International Federation of Journalists
  - IFJ.org
  - For useful information on journalism ethics, rights, press freedoms and links to national journalism organisations around the world.

- BBC Editorial Guidelines
  - Bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/
  - Comprehensive guidelines for broadcast and online reporters and editors.

- Al Jazeera
  - English.aljazeera.net/English
  - Visit the “About Us” section for the broadcaster’s Code of Ethics.

- National Press Photographers Association
  - Nppa.org
  - The web site of the American professional news photographers’ association with a code of ethics, blogs on ethics and other issues and training resources.

- Poynter Online
  - Poynter.org
  - The web site of the Poynter Institute for Journalism Studies.
  - Comprehensive guidelines for broadcast and online reporters and editors.

- EthicNet
  - Utal.fi/ethicnet/
  - A databank of European codes of journalism ethics and other resources.

- Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma
  - Dartcenter.org
  - For insight, support and advice on reporting on victims of violence, including useful tipsheets and guidelines on best practice.

- The International News Safety Institute
  - Newsafety.com
  - For information and advice on journalist safety, including a safety code and a guide to the rights of journalists in conflicts.