

Doing Ethics

Bob Steele, Poynter's ethics group leader, devotes himself to educating journalists of all ages about media ethics. He has devised these questions to help journalists think more critically about ethical decision-making throughout the reporting process.

- What do I know? What do I need to do?

- What is my journalistic purpose?

- What are my ethical concerns?

- What organizational policies and professional guidelines should I consider?

- How can I include other people with different perspectives and diverse ideas in the decision-making process?

- Who are the stakeholders -- those affected by my decision? What are their motivations? Which are legitimate?

- What if the roles were reversed? How would I feel if I were in the shoes of one of the stakeholders?

- What are the possible consequences of my actions? Short term? Long term?

- What are my alternatives to maximize my truth-telling responsibility and minimize harm?

- Can I clearly and fully justify my thinking and my decision? To my colleagues? To the stakeholders? To the public?

Case Studies

Dr. Steele presents these case studies as hypothetical ethical dilemmas a student journalist might face. Try to think about and discuss the scenarios by examining the ethical checklist.

Case #1:

The superintendent of schools in your community issues a press release saying that she is "taking time off to undergo tests for a chronic illness." Two good sources tell you that the superintendent is receiving treatment for depression and alcohol addiction. Neither source will go on the record.

- How do you handle this story?
- What is the threshold for sourcing in a story of this nature?
- Who are the stakeholders?

Case #2:

The issue of abortion remains very controversial in your community. Advocates of a range of positions on the abortion issue have been very active in recent weeks in anticipation of the upcoming anniversary of the historic *Roe vs. Wade* decision. One of the most outspoken voices on the issue is I.M. Clear, one of the leaders in the Operation Rescue movement that is strongly opposed to abortion rights. You learn from two reliable sources that Mr. Clear's 16-year-old daughter has recently had an abortion. Your sources also tell you that Mr. Clear supported his daughter's decision. The 16-year-old daughter goes to your high school.

- What are the ethical issues in this case?
- What is your journalistic responsibility?
- Who are the stakeholders?
- Whom would you interview? Why?
- What alternatives should you consider for advancing the story?

Case #3:

Two students from your school have been arrested and charged with first-degree murder and other felonies after the death of an elderly couple in what police say was a carjacking gone bad. You learn from very reliable sources that one of those arrested is Billy Bob Justice, 17, a senior at your school. The other is Autumn Leaves Virtue, 14, a freshman. Your sources tell you that both have juvenile records. Justice has been arrested several times for armed robbery and assault with a deadly weapon. Virtue has been arrested for shoplifting. Your state law says that juveniles can be tried as an adult in capital murder cases. If they are not, and if they are convicted on the charges against them, the longest they could be incarcerated is until their 21st birthday.

- How do you handle the story?
- What are the challenges you face in identifying the two juveniles?
- What are your alternatives?
- What do you do when Autumn's parents ask you to interview her so she can proclaim her innocence? What if her lawyers object to the interview?