

Journalism Ethics

Praise for *Journalism Ethics: 21 Essentials from Wars to Artificial Intelligence*

“This book should be on every reporter’s desk. Journalism ethics made easy and practical. Eric Wishart put his decades of experience, as a reporter, editor-in-chief, and standards and ethics editor, into these chapters on the many ethical dilemmas a journalist can come across. As a handbook and a quick reference work, the book is a true treasure trove.”

—**Margo Smit**, president, The Organization of News Ombuds and Standards Editors

“Eric Wishart brings a depth of experience and wisdom to this succinct, easy-to-read examination of the ethics and culture of journalism. As a refresher for professionals or a primer for students and information consumers who want to understand the principles of responsible, reliable journalism, this compact work is rich with valuable lessons and guidance.”

—**Fred Brown**, ethics committee chair, Society of Professional Journalists

“This is an essential book for those carving out a career in journalism and seeking to build solid foundations from strong ethics. It is an excellent guide for student journalists and those seeking a refresher in the principles that steer this noble profession. It is the perfect work for anyone interested in how accurate, trustworthy, truth-seeking, fact-driven journalism is created.”

—**Leona O’Neill**, head of undergraduate journalism, Ulster University

“Teachers and students of journalism will find this book useful as a textbook on journalistic ethics. News organisations can use it as a handy reference for newsroom practice, while members of the public interested in debating the do’s and don’ts of journalism can use it as a starting point for discussion.”

—**C. K. Lau**, former head and professor, Department of Journalism, Hong Kong Baptist University, and former editor-in-chief, *South China Morning Post*

“Eric is a champion in news organisational risk management and a huge advocate for journalists’ safety. He has seen so many untrained and ill-prepared journalist lives lost due to war, natural disasters and direct targeting. News organisations and journalists have an ethical responsibility to try to minimise the risks involved in the reporting and production of news.”

—**Tony Loughran**, global risk specialist, author of *Zero Risk: Keeping Others Safe in a Dangerous World*

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21 Essentials from Wars to
Artificial Intelligence

Eric Wishart



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Cover image: Journalists run for cover from tear gas canisters fired by Israeli forces during a demonstration near the Jewish settlement of Beit El in the occupied West Bank on 9 September 2019. Photo by Abbas Momani/AFP.

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Preface

I was taught nothing about ethics when I started my career as a trainee journalist in Scotland 50 years ago. I spent a year at journalism school in Edinburgh, then worked for two years in local newspapers to learn the trade. At no point was the word “ethics” ever used.

Newspapers had stylebooks, but these were mainly designed to give guidance on a publication’s house style for spelling, grammar, headlines, and page design.

The main things that I learned at journalism school were media law, which was essential if you were reporting on crime and covering court proceedings, and how to write 100 words per minute in Pitman shorthand, a phonetic system for rapid note taking.

There were rules that, without being codified, were consistent with what we now regard as ethical guidelines.

The first rule, which was drummed into me from the very start, was the critical importance of accuracy. You had to get it right, which meant ensuring that you had the correct names, titles, dates, ages, addresses and locations, and had quoted people faithfully.

There was no room for excuses. If a sub-editor shouted across the newsroom, “Are you sure this is how you spell it?”,

your answer had better be a confident, “Yes” and never “I think so”.

If you did get it wrong, and it slipped past the subs’ desk and a mistake ended up in the paper, then you had to own up and publish a correction in the next edition.

In those pre-internet days, there were none of the quick fixes that you can now do online. If you made a mistake in a weekly paper, it would haunt you on the newsstands for a full seven days, leaving you in a kind of journalistic purgatory, and it would haunt you again when the correction was printed and took its own place for a week on the newsstands. Working for a local newspaper meant that everyone in the community knew who had made the error, and readers would not hesitate to march into the front office to complain and ask to see the reporter who was responsible. You learned about accountability the hard way.

The concepts of “minimising harm” and “duty of care” to those whom you were covering and their families were alien to the journalism culture of that time, and they still are to some sectors of the media.

However, there was one convention that did show we had a moral conscience even if it was not codified. It was universally agreed that you did not publish the names of petty shoplifters who had appeared in court and been fined. They were usually terrified of the additional shame of having their names published in the local newspaper, and were often in need of counselling to treat their compulsion to steal items of little value.

We were less caring, however, when we had the task of trying to get a “collect pic” from relatives of someone who had just died or had been killed — in an accident, a fire, a murder or, on one occasion for me, a war.

It involved cold calling the family by ringing on the doorbell and asking the distraught relative who came to the door — mother, wife, husband, son, daughter — for a picture of the deceased that you could print in the paper.

You could be welcomed, which was the case when I was sent to interview the proud parents of a young soldier who had just been killed in the Falklands War in 1982. Or you could be threatened by an angry relative, as I was when I was sent on the gruesome mission to collect the photo of a toddler who had just been run over by a train on the railway line that ran behind the family's council house.

As a trainee at *The Evening Times*, I was assigned to a seasoned reporter whose trick was to ask the family for all the photographs they had of the dead person “so we can choose the best one”. The reasoning became clear quite quickly: as we left a bereaved family one day, with a haul of photos, we ran into a reporter and photographer from the now long-defunct *Evening Citizen* who were climbing the stairs. “Good luck boys,” my colleague said to them, knowing that they would be leaving empty-handed.

He also explained to me the importance of being quick. “It's better to get them (family members) when they are still in shock,” he said. “It's more difficult when what happened begins to set in.”

It was an early exercise in detaching your emotions from your work. As I tell my journalism students, when you get an insulting or violent reaction, don't take it personally.

Apart from reporting news, I wrote columns about pop music and motoring, and experienced the lavish entertainment, gifts, and other forms of freebies that public relations managers shower on journalists to obtain favourable coverage.

After 12 years in Scottish newspapers, mainly at the *Lennox Herald* and *Paisley Daily Express*, I joined the English desk of the international news agency Agence France-Presse in Paris in August 1984.

The AFP Stylebook was an A–Z of spelling and grammar, with guidelines on translation and transliteration, and a list of concise ethical guidelines.

Three decades later, ethical issues surrounding the coverage of an attack on the Paris offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* showed that our AFP code needed to be updated and expanded to meet the challenges of the social media age.

Amateur footage of a policeman being killed in the street by the gunmen as they fled the scene raised several ethical questions about the use of graphic images, the duty of care to victims and their families, and responsibility to people who record and upload content.

AFP's global news director, Michèle Léridon, asked me to draw up a document outlining our guiding editorial principles (AFP Charter), a new ethics code (AFP Editorial Standards and Best Practices), and a document dedicated to the use of sources (20 Principles of Sourcing).

We agreed that transparency was essential to help foster public trust in our production, so all three documents would be posted online in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, and Spanish.

How did I write an ethics code for an international news agency from scratch?

First, I read every ethics code that I could find from around the world, and a pattern quickly emerged. Most of these documents shared the universal values of accuracy, seeking the truth, impartiality and fairness, transparency in correcting errors, independence, duty of care, accountability, avoiding conflicts

of interest, and not profiting by taking cash or gifts in exchange for coverage.

These principles form the basis of this book, and I have included a selection of ethics codes from around the world as references.

Most of the codes that I read were text-focused, a reflection of how many editors viewed journalism in the old days. That would not work for AFP, an international news agency with a multimedia production.

Of course, you do not produce an ethics code in isolation, so the second stage of the process involved an agency-wide consultation with the AFP editorial team. That included discussions with the photo, video, and graphics departments on drawing up ethical guidelines for their respective services to be included in the final document.

It was important to base the ethical rules on guidance from authoritative sources, several of which are quoted in this book: the UNHCR on covering migrants and refugees; the ICRC on prisoners of war; the international courts in The Hague on reporting war crimes; the IPCC on climate change; and the organisations GLAAD and the Trans Journalists Association for LGBTQ issues.

In addition to my work at AFP I began teaching journalism at the University of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Baptist University and giving talks about the fight against “fake news” and disinformation at journalism conferences and other events in Asia, Europe, and the US.

My work on ethics for AFP, the university teaching, and the speaking engagements made me very aware of the major changes upending the world of journalism.

Donald Trump's attacks on the "fake news" media were being echoed by authoritarian leaders around the world, and public trust in traditional sources of news was being eroded at a time when disinformation and conspiracy theories flooded social media.

COVID-19 only made things worse. People needed science-based information to help them navigate the pandemic but were faced with a deluge of bogus claims and conspiracy theories about treatments, vaccines, and the origins of the virus.

The pandemic showed how essential it was for journalists to provide verified information so that people could make informed decisions about their health. Also, when reporting on the pandemic, it was important to avoid amplifying dangerous, ill-informed rhetoric that could, and did, lead to deaths.

Which brings me to the reasons for writing this book. There are a lot of books available on journalism but very few about media ethics, as I discovered when I drew up reading lists for my students at the University of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Baptist University.

Given this, I decided to write a book that would focus on 21 essential areas of coverage, with chapters on traditional journalistic values and others on more current topics such as the representation of women, climate coverage, LGBTQ issues, disability and mental health, and artificial intelligence.

I also included a chapter on safety, which does not generally feature in ethics codes but is fundamental to journalism. Journalists have an ethical duty to be properly trained and equipped when they enter a hostile environment so that they do not pose a danger to themselves and those around them and can administer basic first aid in an emergency.

News organisations also have an ethical responsibility to provide training and protective gear to journalists working for them in the field — both staffers and freelancers.

The thinking and culture around safety for journalists have changed dramatically in the past 30 years. When I was sent to Algiers in January 1992 to cover what became the start of the Algerian Civil War, the only safety advice that I received was to not stand near the AFP office window because there might be shooting outside.

A decade later, at the time of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, AFP introduced mandatory hostile environment training for all journalists covering wars and other danger zones. Likewise, PTSD is now recognised as a condition requiring treatment, where in the past journalists may simply have self-medicated with alcohol and drugs to deal with trauma.

This book is designed for journalism students and for my fellow journalists, who may find that it provides a useful reminder of the basic principles of ethics and offers insights into how to deal with the newer challenges facing the profession. It is also meant for non-journalists who wish to understand the principles that underpin trustworthy news production in an era of disinformation overload.

Eric Wishart
Hong Kong
January 2024

Introduction

Aimed at journalism students and working journalists, this book provides ethical guidance on 21 key areas of coverage at a critical time for the media.

Reading this book will also help empower news consumers to make informed choices about what sources of information they can trust. They will discover the principles that separate ethical, reliable journalism from fake news, disinformation, conspiracy theories, hoaxes, and propaganda.

The rise of digital platforms and social media, along with increasingly polarised political and social climates in many countries, have fuelled the spread of disinformation and led to an erosion of public trust in traditional news sources.

Artificial intelligence has created tools that assist journalists in their work but has also given peddlers of disinformation the capacity to produce false texts and fabricated images on an unprecedented scale.

In this context, what separates responsible journalists from those who spread unreliable or false information is their commitment to respecting the ethical principles that underpin the profession.

These guidelines are based on the author's experiences as a journalist for more than 50 years, his work as the standards and ethics editor of AFP news agency, and the universal principles that can be found in ethics codes published by media and journalism institutions around the world. A list of these codes is included at the end of this book for reference.

This book offers guidance for all those engaged in the production of news, from the amateur journalist posting their content online to the seasoned professional.

Reading these guidelines will also equip non-journalists to make informed decisions about the trustworthiness of their sources of news.

Each chapter, dedicated to one of 21 essential areas of coverage, offers ethical guidelines and ends with a three-question exercise to test the reader's understanding of the principles examined.

The book opens by discussing the core principles of accuracy; seeking the truth; balance, impartiality and fairness; and acting independently.

It examines the use of sources, how to navigate the challenges of social media, and journalists' responsibility to exercise a duty of care and minimise harm towards those whom they cover.

It then explores the ethical rules surrounding the production of photos, video and infographics and offers guidance on the use of graphic images — which has become a daily challenge with the increasing amount of disturbing content circulating online.

The book goes on to examine specific areas of coverage: race, religion and ethnicity; gender and sexual orientation; the

representation of women; business and finance; disability and mental health; medicine and health; climate change; crime; and elections.

It discusses the role of artificial intelligence and lays out guidelines on how to use this technology while producing content that the public can trust as authentic.

The book ends with chapters on safety — the most important practical consideration in journalism — and wars and conflicts, among the most complex and dangerous areas of coverage.

In keeping with the importance of inclusiveness examined in the chapters on diversity, gender and sexual orientation, the text uses gender-neutral language when appropriate (they/their, not she/her, he/his). The text uses British English spelling but keeps the original American spelling for official titles and in direct quotes.

Journalism Ethics: 21 Essentials from Wars to Artificial Intelligence provides guidance on the core principles of responsible journalism in an era when the news industry is facing unprecedented challenges.

About the Author

Eric Wishart is the standards and ethics editor, and former editor-in-chief, of the Paris-based international news agency Agence France-Presse. He is a member of the ethics committee of the Society of Professional Journalists, a member of the Organization of News Ombuds and Standards Editors, a judge for the Hong Kong News Awards, and a former president of the Foreign Correspondents' Club, Hong Kong. He teaches journalism at the University of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Baptist University and is an external examiner for Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media, and Culture.

He began his career in Scottish newspapers in 1972, and in 1984 joined the AFP English desk in Paris. He was head of the agency's Middle East English desk in Nicosia from 1992 to 1996 and Asia-Pacific editor from 1996 until 1999, when he was appointed editor-in-chief of AFP, becoming the first non-French journalist to hold that position.

As editor-in-chief, he was responsible for organising the coverage of major international news stories including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the attacks of 11 September 2001, and the death of Pope John Paul II. He returned to Hong Kong in 2005 as the agency's Asia-Pacific director, and from 2013

worked on special editorial projects for the agency's global news management. He was appointed as the agency's first standards and ethics editor in 2022.

In collaboration with the agency's editorial team, Eric drew up the AFP Charter, the code of AFP Editorial Standards and Best Practices, and its 20 Principles of Sourcing. He was also responsible for a complete revamp of the agency's stylebook, which he edits.

AFP is one of the world's leading news agencies, employing around 2,400 staff in more than 150 countries and working in Arabic, English, French, German, Portuguese, and Spanish. It provides real-time coverage of world events in text, photo, video, infographics, and audio, and has the world's largest digital investigation network of more than 140 journalists working in around 90 countries.

Eric was born in Glasgow, Scotland, and has British and Irish nationalities.