

Introduction to Media Ethics and Law

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Key concepts, principles, and practical applications for journalists, broadcasters, and digital content creators.

1. Why Media Ethics & Law Matter

Aspect	Purpose
Public Trust	Ethical conduct builds credibility; legal compliance protects the outlet from lawsuits.
Democratic Function	A free, responsible press informs citizens, holds power to account, and fosters debate.
Risk Management	Understanding legal limits (defamation, privacy, copyright) reduces financial and reputational damage.
Professional Standards	Guides daily decision-making, from story selection to publishing.

2. Core Ethical Principles

Principle	Description	Typical Application
Truth & Accuracy	Verify facts, correct errors promptly.	Fact-checking, multiple sources, transparent corrections.
Independence	Avoid real or perceived conflicts of interest.	Disclose sponsorships, refuse gifts, separate editorial from advertising.
Fairness & Impartiality	Present diverse viewpoints; avoid bias.	Balanced reporting, give subjects a chance to comment.
Minimizing Harm	Consider impact on individuals & communities.	Sensitive handling of trauma, privacy, minors, and vulnerable groups.
Accountability	Own up to mistakes; be open to criticism.	Public editor, ombudsman, correction policies.
Respect for Human Dignity	Avoid dehumanizing language, stereotypes.	Inclusive language, cultural sensitivity.

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Most professional codes (e.g., SPJ, IMC, UNESCO) blend these principles.

3. Legal Foundations (U.S. focus; comparable concepts exist globally)

Legal Area	What It Regulates	Key Cases / Statutes	Practical Checklist
Defamation (libel & slander)	False statements that harm reputation.	<i>New York Times v. Sullivan</i> (actual malice standard for public figures).	• Verify factual claims. • Keep records of sources. • Use “reasonable journalist” defense.
Privacy	Intrusion, public disclosure of private facts, false light, appropriation.	<i>Cox v. New York</i> (intrusion), <i>Doe v. Cahill</i> (public disclosure).	• Obtain consent when possible. • Weigh newsworthiness vs. privacy. • Use original content or licensed material.
Copyright	Protection of original works; limits for fair use.	<i>Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music</i> (fair use factors).	• Apply 4-factor fair use test.
Trademark & Right of Publicity	Unauthorized commercial use of names/likeness.	<i>Louboutin v. Yves Saint Laurent</i> (trademark).	• Avoid using protected marks in a way that suggests endorsement.
Broadcast Regulation	Content standards for radio/TV (indecent, political advertising).	FCC rules; <i>FCC v. Pacifica</i> (indecent speech).	• Follow time-based indecency rules. • Disclose political ad sponsors.
Freedom of Information (FOIA)	Public’s right to access government records.	<i>Department of Justice v. Reporters Committee</i> (privacy exemptions).	• File FOIA requests; cite exemptions when denied.
Data Protection & Cyberlaw	Handling personal data, online harassment.	GDPR (EU), CCPA (California).	• Obtain consent for data collection. • Secure stored data; provide opt-out.

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