

Five ethical scenarios for debate

The following are five scenarios you might find yourself in as a practicing journalist. As with ethical issues in any walk of life, there is not necessarily a 'right answer' or perfect way to deal with the situation, but there will be approaches you can take that best serve you, your media organisation, your sources, story subjects and readership; as you read and consider each situation try to remember those parties involved.

1.

A friend sends you a Direct Message on Twitter linking to a photo they've seen someone posted on Twitter, in the public domain. It shows a car crash in their neighbourhood, taken ten minutes ago. There's no text with the image but the location of the tweet is shown in the app, and you can tell from this where it was taken. There is no one in the car but it is very seriously damaged, so there could have been serious injuries or worse. This tweeter has 37 followers, and no one has replied with a comment or retweeted or 'Liked' it yet. You look online for other breaking news of this crash, but there's nothing. So, you are tempted to try and cover this story: how do you go about it?

2.

A man who knows you as a local journalist and activist who has written stories about parental rights telephones you. He tells you his wife has taken his children away after a messy breakup and he doesn't know where they are. He would like you to write an appeal and help get it shared on social media so that he can be reunited with his children. He has photos that can be used in the story to help identify them and report their whereabouts if readers see them in public. What do you do, and what are your first steps?

3.

A local man with links to a terrorist cell is thought to have moved away from the area months ago, as reported by the police and covered by the local newspaper you work for. Then a citizen phones into your office saying they recognised him in the street, and you run a story about this new sighting, but without naming the witness - you call him 'a source' instead. You are named as the writer with a byline, both in the newspaper and on the newspaper's Facebook page. The story gets a lot of media attention but also people claiming the story is made up because you didn't name the source. What do you do?

4.

A group are campaigning in your city against the development of housing in an area that is suspected to be on grounds of archeological significance. The city council have not demanded a check and report of the area and the campaigners suspect it is because there are ancient ruins there that would slow or stop the development if discovered. The campaigners are using a closed Facebook group to mobilise their protests, in the form of petitions and letters to the council. You have become a member of this private group, and have been observing their discussions but not told them you're a journalist. As the diggers are due to start clearing the space for construction in a few days, the group is used to plan direct action, occupying the space and with your privilege within the group you can be first to cover the story. What is your approach?

5.

You have been working with a couple of local, freelance researchers on a story that is critical of how the local television station has gone about making some of their staff redundant. One of the researchers helped with access to some of the staff because they have worked for that station in the past. Now your story needs to go to print. You contact the researchers to ask whether they would like their name and social media details printed in the byline, as they had both contributed. But as it's holiday season you get 'out of office' email replies, and they're not available until after the print deadline. What can you do?

In the next topic we will be looking at a case study: Ethics gone wrong, and what happened.

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