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| **In this chapter we consider the ways in which journalists are tempted to go against their ethical standards. We also consider ways to resist these temptations.**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_Journalists are professional people, trying to work within a code of professional ethics. As we saw in the last chapter, this includes the need to be fair to all parties involved in any news story.However, journalists cannot operate in a vacuum, doing what they think is right without pressures being put on them. Journalists face pressure from a variety of sources, all trying to make the journalist behave in a way which is not the way the journalist would choose.It is important that you try to resist all these forms of pressure, as far as possible.Of course, you will sometimes fail. This is an imperfect world, and journalists are also imperfect. Nevertheless, you should always try to resist the kinds of pressure which we shall discuss in this chapter.resist pressureJournalists are professional people, trying to work within a code of professional ethics. This includes the need to be fair to all parties involved in any news story.However, journalists cannot operate in a vacuum, doing what they think is right without pressures being put on them. Journalists face pressure from a variety of sources, all trying to make the journalist behave in a way which is not the way the journalist would choose.It is important that you try to resist all these forms of pressure, as far as possible.**Employer**Your employer pays your salary. In return, they expect to say how you will do your job. This can lead to ethical problems for journalists.If you work for a government-owned news organisation, then your government will be your employer. This could make it very difficult for you to report critically on things which the government is doing.Ministers will often put pressure on public service journalists to report things which are favourable to the government (even when they are not newsworthy) and not to report things which are unfavourable to the government. They can enforce public service discipline, to make journalists do as the government wants. This is especially difficult to resist in small developing countries, where there may be little or no alternative employment.It is not only government-owned media where such pressure exists, though.Commercial media are paid for by a mixture of advertising and sales. To increase sales, newspapers, radio and television stations sometimes sponsor sporting or cultural events, and then publicise them. Your boss may demand more coverage for the event than it is worth, in order to promote the event as much as possible. You will need to persuade them of the danger of this - that other events will have to be neglected to give extra coverage to your sponsored event, and that this will risk losing readers or listeners.Advertisers can also bring pressure to bear upon owners and editors. A big advertiser may threaten to stop advertising unless you run a news report of something good which the advertiser has just done; or, much worse, it may threaten to stop advertising unless you ignore a news event which is unfavourable to the advertiser.Ideally, any news organisation should dismiss such threats, and judge each story only on its news merits. However, this is easier in a large community with a diverse and developed economy than it is in a small country with a developing economy. When a commercial news organisation is operating on a tiny profit margin, it will not be easy to turn away a big advertiser, and its owners may feel forced to give in to the pressure.In some cases, the advertiser may even be the government. In many countries the government is the biggest advertiser - with job advertisements, calls for tenders, public announcements and so on - and this can be a way in which governments bring indirect pressure to bear upon commercial news media.What should you do about this kind of pressure? The first thing which any junior journalist should do is to report it to their editor. It will be for the editor to decide what to do. He or she will need to resist the employer as far as possible, pointing out the dangers of failing to report the news fully and fairly.  The main danger is that readers or listeners who already know of the event which is being suppressed, realise that it is not being reported and so lose confidence in the newspaper, radio or television station involved. This may, in the long run, result in more serious problems for ministers than some short-term embarrassment, and may do more long-term damage to your organisation's finances than the loss of one advertiser.The truth is, though, that your power to resist pressure from your employer is limited. You can only do your best, and accept that the rest is beyond your control.**Authority**Both government-owned and commercial news media may face pressure from authority - the government, the police, customs, or some other branch of authority.Governments can threaten, or make, laws to force all news media to be licensed. This would give them power to grant licences only to those news organisations which please the government. Even the threat to introduce such legislation may be enough to frighten journalists, and to make them afraid of criticising the government too much.The best way to resist such pressure is to stimulate public debate on the issue of media licensing. As with any proposed legislation, the news media should encourage public debate before it comes in, so that leaders have the opportunity to judge public opinion.If society generally is opposed to licensing of all news media, then a democratically-elected government will think very seriously before introducing such a thing. On the other hand, if society wants news media to be licensed by government, then it is something which journalists will just have to accept, however much they may disagree with it.Other forms of authority may bring pressure to bear on you in less official ways. Police may attempt to confiscate your camera when you are taking photographs which the police do not like; or they may deny you access to a court room or a public meeting; or they may order you not to report certain things. Junior journalists should always report such incidents to their editor.The editor will best resist this kind of pressure by knowing precisely what he is allowed to do, and what he is not allowed to do. If he knows that the police are acting outside their powers, he can politely approach a very senior police officer, or even the Police Minister, and report the incident. They can then handle it. If the police act outside their powers and no action is taken, even though it has been reported, then the editor can publicise the fact in a major news story. It is wise, though, to try to sort out such problems quietly first, since in this way future relations may be more positive.**Threats**Many people think they can avoid bad publicity by threatening journalists with violence, or with legal action. Such threats should always be resisted (unless you are advised by a lawyer that you are legally in the wrong).Junior journalists should always report any threat which they have received to their editor. If the threat was a threat of violence, then the editor should seriously consider informing the police. It is usually a criminal offence to threaten violence against somebody, and journalists are protected by such a law as much as anybody else.If the threat is of legal action, then the editor's response will depend upon the facts of the case. The editor should know the law well enough to judge whether or not to take the threat seriously. If he suspects that there may be grounds for legal action, he should consult a lawyer. Then, if he finds that he or his reporter is in the wrong, of course he should immediately set things right. If, however, he finds that there is no basis for legal action, then he and his reporter can happily ignore the empty threat.**Bribes**Journalists do not usually earn big money. You may therefore be vulnerable to bribery - somebody offering money (or goods or services) in return for a favourable story being written, or an unfavourable story being ignored.To accept a bribe is dishonest. Your honesty is like virginity - it can only be lost once. Once you have accepted a bribe, you can never again be trusted as a professional person.Journalists who are offered bribes will usually be offered them in private. This is so that the person attempting the bribe can later deny that it ever happened. If this happens, you should immediately invite somebody else into the room, and then ask the briber to repeat their offer. They are unlikely to do so but, if they do, you will have a witness.In any case, report the matter to your editor.**Gifts and freebies**Commercial companies sometimes try to buy journalists' friendship by giving them small presents or by giving them the opportunity to travel at the company's expense (sometimes called **freebies**).Often this travel is legitimate. An airline which is introducing a new route to and from your country may well offer you a free seat on the first flight. You will then have the opportunity to write from first-hand experience about the service and about the destination. If the airline is confident that its service is good, and that the destination is interesting, they will be satisfied that whatever you write will be good publicity for them.As long as it is understood that you are free to write whatever you like, without the company that provides the free travel having any influence, such an arrangement is acceptable. However, if you are offered a ticket in return for writing "something nice" about the company, this is not acceptable. Poor newspapers, radio and television stations may be grateful for charity to top up inadequate travel budgets, but they should never be so poor that they sell their professional honour.In any case, such offers should never be accepted or negotiated by a junior journalist. Only the editor should do so, and any offers must be referred to the editor. The editor can judge whether or not the terms of the offer are acceptable.Gifts are a difficult area. Small gifts, such as a tie or a bottle of whisky, may be acceptable, but the gift should not be so big as to buy your loyalty. The golden rule for each journalist is whether they would care very much if the company decided not to offer another gift like this in the future. If you do not care whether they offer you such a gift again, then you have not been bought. If you deeply desire another similar gift, you are in danger; remove the temptation by telling the company not to send any more.The former editor of the *Hindustan Times*, Khushwant Singh, once said that he would accept a bottle of whisky from anybody, because he would still feel free to criticise them; but he would not accept a case (12 bottles) of whisky, because he was afraid that might influence the way he did his job.In any case, all gifts, however small, should be declared to your editor. If your editor considers that any gift is too large or too generous to be accepted, you will have to return it, politely but firmly. People need to know that you and your news organisation have moral and ethical standards, and are prepared to live by them.Sometimes, executives in companies or government departments will devote a lot of time and energy to making you into their friend. They may take you out for meals, buy you drinks or invite you to their home. Beware of this. If it is genuine friendship, there may be no problem; but it may be an attempt to win your loyalty. It is as bad to run a story which is just a free advertisement, or to suppress bad news, as a favour to a friend, as it is to do the same thing in return for a bribe.**Family**In many societies, a person's first loyalty is to members of their extended family, or clan, or tribe. This is expected to take priority over all other loyalties, including their loyalty to the ethical standards of their profession. Thus, a doctor who saved the life of a traditional clan enemy could meet with disapproval from his own relatives.Journalists, too, face conflicts of loyalty like this. It may not only be pressure from your family, clan or tribe; it may also be from members of a club or association or church to which you belong.For young journalists in small societies, this is often the hardest kind of pressure to resist. They understand that they should have a loyalty to their professional ethics, but deep down they are certain that they must not offend the family. To do so, and to be cut off from the family, would be unthinkable.It is important, therefore, that you avoid such conflicts of interest whenever possible. If you are told by your editor to cover a story which involves your own extended family, or clan, or tribe, you should point out to the editor this conflict of loyalty and ask that the story be assigned to another reporter.The hardest job is that of the editor himself. He cannot avoid the clash of responsibility in this way, and must make the decision either to please his family and sacrifice his organisation's credibility; or to maintain his professional standards and cut himself off from his family. Neither decision will be easy, but it is to be hoped that senior journalists in such situations will be able to set an example of professional and ethical courage to their junior colleagues.[^^back to the top](https://www.thenewsmanual.net/Manuals%20Volume%203/volume3_58.htm#top)**Tradition**In societies which are in rapid change from traditional to modern Western ways, there is often a clash between the way in which things were done in the past and the way in which the profession says they should be done now.For example, freedom of speech may itself be a recent imported concept. Traditionally, it may be that only men of a certain rank had the right to express their views; or that certain clans had the right to express their views on certain subjects; and it may have been the case that very few people had the right to question a chief.All this is very different to a Western-style free Press, in which everybody is encouraged to speak on every subject, and journalists, however junior, are encouraged to cross-examine leaders, however senior.Tradition will often be used as a weapon to pressure journalists into patterns of behaviour which go against their professional ethics. Junior journalists should always report such instances to their editor, and seek guidance.The way forward will require careful thought. The professional ethics of journalists in your country may still be developing. They will be influenced by professional journalists' ethics in other countries, where journalism is more established; but they will also be influenced by the traditions of your society. Out of a clash of cultures, a new culture may develop, suitable for your society in the modern world. Only you, and other journalists in your society, can form these new ethical standards for your society; and you must be prepared both to listen carefully to other points of view and to act according to your judgment, while these new standards are emerging.[^^back to the top](https://www.thenewsmanual.net/Manuals%20Volume%203/volume3_58.htm#top)**Personal conviction**Journalists may come under pressure from their own strong beliefs.For example, a journalist who is deeply opposed to capital punishment may be writing a story about crime. In the course of gathering the information, they may interview somebody who calls for the death penalty as the answer to increasing crime. The journalist may be tempted not to report these comments, and to leave the question of capital punishment out of the story. This would clearly be unethical.It is as bad to censor the news to suit your own views as it is to censor the news to please your family, or clan, or tribe. This is contrary to the most fundamental principle of free speech - that we may disagree with what somebody says, but that we must fight to defend their right to say it. See *Chapter 57: Fairness*for a fuller discussion of this principle.It is not only the things you really believe in which may cause problems. Some journalists accept contracts to advertise products, as a way of earning some extra money. You must think carefully before you do this.If you are seen by your readers or listeners to be in favour of a particular product, they will not believe that you are impartial if you later report a story about that or any rival products.It is important for journalists to be impartial. You may know that you have no special liking for the product which you advertised - you only did it for the money - but your readers or listeners will not know that.**Codes of ethics**In many countries journalists try to work within a professional code of ethics. This usually lays down in simple, straightforward terms the kind of things they should and should not do. Typically such codes contain rules about issues such as honesty, fairness, independence and respect for the rights of other people such as interviewees, victims and readers or listeners.In most free press democracies, journalist codes of ethics are usually voluntary, perhaps monitored by a professional association or journalist union. In such cases, the only real sanctions against journalists who breach the codes are criticism from colleagues and perhaps loss of membership of the association or union. In some cases media employers might use the journalist code of ethics to set standards for journalists they employ, in which case breaches of the codes might lead to discipline or even sacking.In some countries where the media are suppressed, the government may try to control what is written or broadcast by imposing a code of ethics backed by law and policed by the authorities. These are like any other laws in such countries; breaking them may lead to punishment, so it is up to journalists themselves to decide whether to obey oppressive codes or follow the higher principles of journalistic ethics and risk the consequences.A good example of a journalist code of ethics in free press democracies is from the Australian[Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA)](http://www.alliance.org.au/code-of-ethics.html). It states:**AJA CODE OF ETHICS***Respect for truth and the public's right to information are fundamental principles of journalism. Journalists describe society to itself. They convey information, ideas and opinions, a privileged role. They search, disclose, record, question, entertain, suggest and remember. They inform citizens and animate democracy. They give a practical form to freedom of expression. Many journalists work in private enterprise, but all have these public responsibilities. They scrutinise power, but also exercise it, and should be accountable. Accountability engenders trust. Without trust, journalists do not fulfil their public responsibilities. MEAA members engaged in journalism commit themselves to** **Honesty**
* **Fairness**
* **Independence**
* **Respect for the rights of others**

1.  Report and interpret honestly, striving for accuracy, fairness and disclosure of all essential facts.  Do not suppress relevant available facts, or give distorting emphasis.  Do your utmost  to give a fair opportunity for reply.2.  Do not place unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics, including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexual orientation, family relationships, religious belief, or physical or intellectual disability.3.  Aim to attribute information to its source.  Where a source seeks anonymity, do not agree without first considering the source’s motives and any alternative attributable source.  Where confidences are accepted,  respect them in all circumstances.4.  Do not allow personal interest, or any belief, commitment, payment, gift or benefit, to undermine your accuracy, fairness or independence.5.  Disclose conflicts of interest that affect, or could be seen to affect, the accuracy, fairness or independence of your journalism.  Do not improperly use a journalistic position for personal gain.  6.  Do not allow advertising or other commercial considerations to undermine accuracy, fairness or independence.7.  Do your utmost to ensure disclosure of any direct or indirect payment made for interviews, pictures, information or stories.8.  Use fair, responsible and honest means to obtain material.  Identify yourself and your employer before obtaining any interview for publication or broadcast.  Never exploit a person’s vulnerability or ignorance of media practice.9.  Present pictures and sound which are true and accurate.  Any manipulation likely to mislead should be disclosed.10.  Do not plagiarise.11.  Respect private grief and personal privacy.  Journalists have the right to resist compulsion to intrude.12.  Do your utmost to achieve fair correction of errors.**Guidance Clause***Basic values often need interpretation and sometimes come into conflict. Ethical journalism requires conscientious decision-making in context. Only substantial advancement of the public interest or risk of substantial harm to people allows any standard to be overridden.*Other useful codes can be found at:The [Philippines Press Institute](http://pressinstitute.ph/codeofethics/ppicode1.html)The [Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ)](http://www.caj.ca/principles/principles-statement-2002.htm)The British [National Union of Journalists (NUJ)](http://www.nuj.org.uk/innerPagenuj.html?docid=174)The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) website has links to a [Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists](http://www.ifj.org/en/pages/about-ifj).[Journalism.org](http://www.journalism.org/resources/ethics_codes), the Pew Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism has links to several industry and professional codes, mainly in the US.[Ethicnet](http://ethicnet.uta.fi/codes_by_country) has links to codes of ethics and practice for most European countries but be warned, some of them come from countries where independent media are suppressed and the codes are used by governments to constrain journalists. With a similar warning, [Medialaw.com](http://www.medialaw.com.sg/ethics/jcode.htm) gives several codes of ethics for Asian countries.Finally, [Al Jazeera](http://english.aljazeera.net/aboutus/2006/11/2008525185733692771.html) provides an example of how a media organisation can develop a sophisticated professional code of ethics for its journalists.**TO SUMMARISE:****Live by the ethical standards of your profession; resist all forms of pressure to lower your standards****Report any threats, bribes or other secret pressure to your editor****Do not sell yourself for a gift or freebie****Avoid reporting stories in which you have family interests or other loyalties**  |
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