Journalists have a tremendous responsibility. Almost every day, we make decisions that affect other people, decisions that might mean invading someone’s private grief by printing stories or photographs about death and other tragedies. Some of us became journalists because we wanted to be the people’s voice, we wanted somehow to use our work lives to tell the stories and take the photos that document how others live their lives, how our society works—or doesn’t. That means that everything we do as journalists is in the public spotlight—just as much as the people who are in our stories and photos. Underlying all of our decisions about which stories and photos we should publish or broadcast is the sense that we are dealing with real people and the crises that affect their lives. We need to be sure that we’re making the right decisions, decisions that will tell people who we are as journalists and as people.

Doing ethics in journalism is tough, and it’s made even more difficult when we try to make what we consider to be moral decisions without having any background in moral theory. A brief introduction of moral theory might make doing ethics a bit easier and provide some background on which to base our decisions.

Doing journalism ethics represents a clash of at least two moral theories: teleology and deontology. Teleology (from the Greek word telos) is a goal-based moral theory. The end is the point of our action. Journalism is, in most cases, goal-directed. Our newspapers and commercial television and radio stations are businesses with goals: To give the readers the information that they need, to sell advertising, to increase readership, to make money for the owner. Most of those goals may not be motivations for the journalist; they are corporate goals.

But individual journalists, too, may have goals that help us decide how we should act. For example, when we write a story or take a photo, we might
ask ourselves: Why are we doing this? What should this story or photo accomplish? That’s teleology, goal-directed ethics. Teleology can be subdivided into at least two other groups: utilitarianism and consequentialism. The earliest form of utilitarianism was based on pleasure. Early utilitarians asked themselves: What action will bring about the greatest pleasure or avoid the most pain? Whatever action best answered that question was the “correct” action. Later, that theory moved away from hedonism (pleasure) and evolved into what is called the greatest happiness principle. John Stuart Mill said we should base our moral decisions on what will bring about the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people and, at the same time, minimize harm to everyone else. Doing ethics that way involved a constant calculation of how much happiness and how many people, the intensity of the happiness, etc. What might bring the greatest good to the greatest number today in one situation might not bring the greatest good tomorrow in another case.

Consequentialism focuses, as its name suggests, on the consequences of the act. A consequentialist journalist would ask: If I take this photo or write this story, what are the likely consequences? Will it bring about social change? Will it educate people? Will it unnecessarily upset people? In utilitarianism—including consequentialism—the act itself isn’t morally right or wrong. It’s the result of that action that is right or wrong. As you can see, a utilitarian might say lying to get a story is permissible if the consequences of telling that lie are good. Using this theory, I might say I could lie or use a hidden camera or even take a photo of someone who doesn’t want a photo taken if the end result justifies that action. If I think going undercover to get a story will mean a story that might educate people about an important issue, I might, if I were a teleologist, say that the end justifies the means—and I could say that my deception to get the story results in a morally right act.

Deontologists would have something to say about that. Deontology (based on the Greek word, deon, which means “duty”) abandons the happiness principle by insisting on a strict adherence to rules. Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher from the eighteenth century, is the most famous of the deontologists. Kant’s entire ethical theory is based on one rule: the Categorical Imperative. The Categorical Imperative is exactly what its name says it is: It’s an imperative because it’s a command—we have no choice about whether to obey or not—and it’s categorical because it applies everywhere, all of the time. A deontologist who thinks lying or deception is wrong would say it’s wrong even if deceiving someone means a great story that might bring about some good in society. Lying is wrong, and it’s always
wrong in every case. The outcome of telling that lie is not important. What’s important is not lying.

It sounds as if, in the teleology-based world of journalism, deontology wouldn’t be of much help, but Kant included in his moral theory an important safeguard. The Categorical Imperative states that, in any decision we make, we should consider whether we would be able to accept that everyone else could do the exact same thing. This principle of universalizability tells us that an action is moral if we would agree that everyone else could do it, too. While we are considering this principle, we also have to think about Kant’s second principle: Treat people as ends in themselves, never as means to an end. In other words, we shouldn’t use people for what they can do for us, whether that’s helping us get a better story or a better photo.

The universalizability principle of Kant’s Categorical Imperative may make deontology usable in journalism after all. Suppose I’ve been told that a local store owner is selling shoddy goods or overcharging his customers. The only way I can get documentation for that story is by getting a job in that store—and I would have to lie to the store owner to get that job, since he obviously wouldn’t hire me if he knew I was a reporter looking for a story. A teleologist might say that the story—the goal of my lying—would result in the store owner being exposed for cheating his customers, and the customers would have the information they need to make a wiser choice about where to shop. To a teleologist, that outcome—the good that would come from telling a lie to get the story—would justify the lie that was needed to reach that outcome.

A deontologist, however, has more work to do before deciding whether to lie to get a story. The Categorical Imperative tells me that it’s wrong to lie, so it seems that I have my answer. But the Categorical Imperative also tells me that my action might be a right act if I am willing to accept that same action from everybody else. In that case, I should ask myself whether I would agree that lying would be acceptable if another journalist were investigating my close friend or relative. Using reason, I would have to decide whether I could accept my behavior as the standard for everyone else to follow. Some Kantian purists might say that this is taking liberties with Kant’s ethics, and maybe it is, but it also points out a way to make a rule-based theory applicable to an outcome-based profession like journalism.

Few things in journalism are clearly right or clearly wrong. Few of us can claim to be completely teleologists or deontologists. Sometimes in journalism, we might have to make difficult decisions using both theories. We might start out with a teleological question: What do I hope to accomplish
with this report? Then, we might check our code of ethics, the written list of rules that specify what our company or profession expects our behavior to be. That’s a sort of deontology. Then we might ask why we are doing what we are thinking about doing—a step back to teleology again. The important thing to remember in doing ethics is understanding why you are doing what you’re doing. If you stop your ethics by saying: I’m doing this because the company rule says I should do it or I’m doing this because more people will appreciate it than will hate it, you’re probably going to make a mistake—or, at the least, you won’t have an answer when angry readers call you and demand to know how you can justify your decision to them.

As you go through the readings included in this module, always ask “why.” Why did the journalist do what she did? What reasoning did he use to come up with a decision to publish this story or broadcast this image? What, in the realm of moral philosophy, can be used to explain this decision? The module includes examples of graphic photographs that outraged readers in small towns, a look at whether codes of ethics are effective tools for journalists to use, or whether they are only public relations tools to make people think that ethics are important to us. This module also contains writings from scholars in the field and journalists who made tough decisions. The articles were selected to give you an idea of some of the crises that could affect you as a working journalist, and what others are saying about the way we do the jobs we have chosen to do.

Suggested Further Reading

Immanuel Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, a short book that sets out the basics of the Categorical Imperative.

Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*, an elaboration of Kant’s view of duty and virtue in moral theory.

John Stuart Mill’s *On Utilitarianism*, a brief discussion of the moral theory.

*The Virtuous Journalist*

*Philosophical Issues in Journalism*

Sissela Bok’s *Lying*

*Doing Ethics in Journalism* by Jay Black and Ralph Barney

*Quill*, a publication of the Society of Professional Journalists

Online Resources

The Institute for Applied and Professional Ethics at Ohio University offers an ethics forum for people who want answers to specific questions on ethical
dilemmas in journalism, business, and medicine. The site is at www.ohiou.edu/ethics/qaj.html.

The Society of Professional Journalists offers a Listserv on ethics, inviting questions and responses to ethical dilemmas in journalism. See the Web site at www.spj.org for instructions on how to subscribe to the Listserv.

The Poynter Institute for Media Studies deals with questions of journalism ethics. The Web site is at www.poynter.org.

Scripps-Howard’s Web site poses ethical dilemmas and lets you tell the editors how you would decide them. The site is at www.scripps.com/editorsshoes.html