Ethics Case Studies

[Using the ‘Holocaust’ Metaphor](http://www.spj.org/ecs14.asp)

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA, is a nonprofit animal rights organization known for its controversial approach to communications and public relations. In 2003, PETA launched a new campaign, named “Holocaust on Your Plate,” that compares the slaughter of animals for human use to the murder of 6 million Jews in WWII. [The question: Is “Holocaust on Your Plate” ethically wrong or a truthful comparison?](http://www.spj.org/ecs14.asp)

[Aaargh! Pirates! (and the Press)](http://www.spj.org/ecs15.asp)

As collections of songs, studio recordings from an upcoming album or merely unreleased demos, are [leaked online](http://www.spj.org/ethicscasestudies.asp), these outlets cover the leak with a breaking story or a blog post. But they don’t stop there. *Rolling Stone* and *Billboard* often also will include a link within the story to listen to the songs that were leaked. [The question: If Billboard and Rolling Stone are essentially pointing readers in the right direction, to the leaked music, are they not aiding in helping the Internet community find the material and consume it?](http://www.spj.org/ecs15.asp)

[Reigning on the Parade](http://www.spj.org/ecs16.asp)

Frank Whelan, a features writer who also wrote a history column for the Allentown, Pennsylvania, *Morning Call*, took part in a gay rights parade in June 2006 and stirred up a classic ethical dilemma. The situation raises any number of questions about what is and isn’t a conflict of interest. [The question: What should the “consequences” be for Frank Whelan?](http://www.spj.org/ecs16.asp)

[Controversy over a Concert](http://www.spj.org/ecs17.asp)

Three former members of the Eagles rock band came to Denver during the 2004 election campaign to raise money for a U.S. Senate candidate, Democrat Ken Salazar. John Temple, editor and publisher of the Rocky Mountain News, advised his reporters not to go to the fundraising concerts. [The question: Is it fair to ask newspaper staffers — or employees at other news media, for that matter — not to attend events that may have a political purpose? Are the rules different for different jobs at the news outlet?](http://www.spj.org/ecs17.asp)

[Deep Throat, and His Motive](http://www.spj.org/ecs18.asp)

The Watergate story is considered perhaps American journalism’s defining accomplishment. Two intrepid young reporters for *The Washington Post*, carefully verifying and expanding upon information given to them by sources they went to great lengths to protect, revealed brutally damaging information about one of the most powerful figures on Earth, the American president. [The question: Is protecting a source more important than revealing all the relevant information about a news story?](http://www.spj.org/ecs18.asp)

[When Sources Won’t Talk](http://www.spj.org/ecs19.asp)

The SPJ Code of Ethics offers guidance on at least three aspects of this dilemma. “Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid [inadvertent error](http://www.spj.org/ethicscasestudies.asp).” One source was not sufficient in revealing this information. [The question: How could the editors maintain credibility and remain fair to both sides yet find solid sources for a news tip with inflammatory allegations?](http://www.spj.org/ecs19.asp)

[A Suspect “Confession”](http://www.spj.org/ecs7.asp)

John Mark Karr, 41, was arrested in mid-August in Bangkok, Thailand, at the request of Colorado and U.S. officials. During questioning, he confessed to the murder of JonBenet Ramsey. Karr was arrested after Michael Tracey, a journalism professor at the University of Colorado, alerted authorities to information he had drawn from e-mails Karr had sent him over the past four years. [The question: Do you break a confidence with your source if you think it can solve a murder — or protect children half a world away?](http://www.spj.org/ecs7.asp)

[Who’s the “Predator”?](http://www.spj.org/ecs8.asp)

“To Catch a Predator,” the ratings-grabbing series on NBC’s [Dateline](http://www.spj.org/ethicscasestudies.asp), appeared to catch on with the public. But it also raised serious ethical questions for journalists. [The question: If your newspaper or television station were approached by Perverted Justice to participate in a “sting” designed to identify real and potential perverts, should you go along, or say, “No thanks”? Was NBC reporting the news or creating it?](http://www.spj.org/ecs8.asp)

[The Media’s Foul Ball](http://www.spj.org/ecs9.asp)

The Chicago Cubs in 2003 were five outs from advancing to the World Series for the first time since 1945 when a 26-year-old fan tried to grab a foul ball, preventing outfielder Moises Alou from catching it. The hapless fan's identity was unknown. But he became recognizable through televised replays as the young baby-faced man in glasses, a Cubs baseball cap and earphones who bobbled the ball and was blamed for costing the Cubs a trip to the World Series. [The question: Given the potential danger to the man, should he be identified by the media?](http://www.spj.org/ecs9.asp)

[Publishing Drunk Drivers’ Photos](http://www.spj.org/ecs10.asp)

When readers of *The Anderson News* picked up the Dec. 31, 1997, issue of the newspaper, stripped across the top of the front page was a New Year’s greeting and a warning. “HAVE A HAPPY NEW YEAR,” the banner read. “But please don’t drink and drive and risk having your picture published.” Readers were referred to the editorial page where White explained that starting in January 1998 the newspaper would publish photographs of all persons convicted of drunken driving in Anderson County. [The question: Is this an appropriate policy for a newspaper?](http://www.spj.org/ecs10.asp)

[Naming Victims of Sex Crimes](http://www.spj.org/ecs11.asp)

On January 8, 2007, 13-year-old Ben Ownby disappeared while walking home from school in Beaufort, Missouri. A tip from a school friend led police on a frantic four-day search that ended unusually happily: the police discovered not only Ben, but another boy as well—15-year-old Shawn Hornbeck, who, four years earlier, had disappeared while riding his bike at the age of 11. Media scrutiny on Shawn’s years of captivity became intense. [The question: Question: Should children who are thought to be the victims of sexual abuse ever be named in the media? What should be done about the continued use of names of kidnap victims who are later found to be sexual assault victims? Should use of their names be discontinued at that point?](http://www.spj.org/ecs11.asp)

[A Self-Serving Leak](http://www.spj.org/ecs12.asp)

*San Francisco Chronicle* reporters Mark Fainaru-Wada and Lance Williams were widely praised for their stories about sports figures involved with steroids. They turned their investigation into a very successful book, *Game of Shadows*. And they won the admiration of fellow journalists because they were willing to go to prison to protect the source who had leaked testimony to them from the grand jury investigating the BALCO sports-and-steroids. Their source, however, was not quite so noble. [The question: Should the two reporters have continued to protect this key source even after he admitted to lying? Should they have promised confidentiality in the first place?](http://www.spj.org/ecs12.asp)

[The *Times* and Jayson Blair](http://www.spj.org/ecs13.asp)

Jayson Blair advanced quickly during his tenure at *The New York Times*, where he was hired as a full-time staff writer after his internship there and others at *The Boston Globe* and *The Washington Post*. Even accusations of inaccuracy and a series of corrections to his reports on Washington, D.C.-area sniper attacks did not stop Blair from moving on to national coverage of the war in Iraq. But when suspicions arose over his reports on military families, an internal review found that he was fabricating material and communicating with editors from his Brooklyn apartment — or within the *Times* building — rather than from outside New York. [The question: How does the *Times* investigate problems and correct policies that allowed the Blair scandal to happen?](http://www.spj.org/ecs13.asp)

[Cooperating with the Government](http://www.spj.org/ecs1.asp)

It began on Jan. 18, 2005, and ended two weeks later after the longest prison standoff in recent U.S. history. [The question: Should your media outlet go along with the state’s request not to release the information?](http://www.spj.org/ecs1.asp)

[Offensive Images](http://www.spj.org/ecs2.asp)

Caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad didn’t cause much of a stir when they were first published in September 2005. But when they were republished in early 2006, after Muslim leaders called attention to the 12 images, it set off rioting throughout the Islamic world. Embassies were burned; people were killed. After the rioting and killing started, it was difficult to ignore the cartoons. [Question: Do we publish the cartoons or not?](http://www.spj.org/ecs2.asp)

[The Sting](http://www.spj.org/ecs3.asp)

Perverted-Justice.com is a Web site that can be very convenient for a reporter looking for a good story. But the tactic raises some ethical questions. The Web site scans Internet chat rooms looking for men who can be lured into sexually explicit conversations with invented underage correspondents. Perverted-Justice posts the men’s pictures on its Web site. [Is it ethically defensible to employ such a sting tactic? Should you buy into the agenda of an advocacy group — even if it’s an agenda as worthy as this one?](http://www.spj.org/ecs3.asp)

[A Media-Savvy Killer](http://www.spj.org/ecs4.asp)

Since his first murder in 1974, the “BTK” killer — his own acronym, for “bind, torture, kill” — has sent the Wichita Eagle four letters and one poem. [How should a newspaper, or other media outlet, handle communications from someone who says he’s guilty of multiple sensational crimes? And how much should it cooperate with law enforcement authorities?](http://www.spj.org/ecs4.asp)

[A Congressman’s Past](http://www.spj.org/ecs5.asp)

The (Portland) Oregonian learned that a Democratic member of the U.S. Congress, up for re-election to his fourth term, had been accused by an ex-girlfriend of a sexual assault some 28 years previously. But criminal charges never were filed, and neither the congressman, David Wu, nor his accuser wanted to discuss the case now, only weeks before the 2004 election. [Question: Should The Oregonian publish this story?](http://www.spj.org/ecs5.asp)

[Using this Process to Craft a Policy](http://www.spj.org/ecs6.asp)

It used to be that a reporter would absolutely NEVER let a source check out a story before it appeared. But there has been growing acceptance of the idea that it’s more important to be accurate than to be independent. [Do we let sources see what we’re planning to write? And if we do, when?](http://www.spj.org/ecs6.asp)