

# Ethics and Journalism

## Etik ve Gazetecilik

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**Karen Sanders**

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In a survey done in February 2000 on behalf of the British Medical Association, 2072 adults were asked to rate how trustworthy they believed people in certain careers were. Out of all the participants, 78 per cent of individuals believed that journalists were liars.

While journalism is a trade developed centuries ago, it is without a doubt a career that has evolved over the years. What was once print journalism has now exploded into various other media – from television, and radio, to online blogging and even facebook and twitter journalism. The world's news today reaches us at a faster rate than ever before. Yet, while journalism has extended into various media and sources of information, the basic principles and rules of journalism have remained unchanged. Reliability, honesty, and accuracy in any report on local, national, and international events have been the original principles of journalism for many years. Different daily reports from all varieties of media systems must first conform to ethics before being released to public. Journalism ethics also include the principle of “limitation of harm”, withholding of certain details from reports which might, for example, harm someone's reputation.

Journalists are story tellers that “help create the map by which we...situate our fears, desires and aspirations...Journalists sketch in the contours of our moral landscape. They contribute to the business of telling us who we are, interpreting the world for us, and making it intelligible.” (p. 9). In essence, journalists are our lifeline to the outside world, and its happenings – whether it is news on the latest natural disaster, the global economic situation, or mundane gossip about celebrity life. One can say that without journalists, we would have no way of knowing our surroundings, and without knowing our surroundings, we would be living in concentrated, ignorant bubbles. Journalism has a great power over our lives, and the way we understand the

world. Because of this tremendous amount of power that journalists have in storytelling, ethical and moral reporting in journalism are put on a high pedestal of extreme importance. It is precisely this ethical journalism which is often the cause of much controversy, and the reason why 78 percent of the 2072 participants in the survey labeled journalists as untrustworthy.

Some may think that journalism and ethics, together in the same sentence is nearly impossible. This is not true. The two are not mutually exclusive, and in fact, ethics play a crucial role in creating reliable journalism. In her book “Ethics and Journalism”, Karen Sanders explains just how important ethics are to journalism; in an effort to change the long held misconception that journalism is a trade of lies and deception.

“Ethics and Journalism” provides a way through which the reader can understand the concept of ethical practices in journalism. Many other books have been written in journalism discussing the same subject with different titles.<sup>1</sup>

Ethics is defined differently in various situations. While the fundamental concepts and philosophical theories of ethics are the same, ethical codes change depending on the situation in which they are applied. Workplace ethics differ from legal ethics, which differ from educational ethics, which without a doubt not the same thing as journalistic ethics. Sanders makes this point clear in her book, and settles the argument of the ethical sphere applied to journalism. She argues that without understanding the concept of ethical journalism, and how it is applied, one will ignorantly assume that journalism is an unethical field of practice. However, this is largely due to the fact that people judge journalism based on their own understanding and application of personal ethics and morals, which differ from occupational ethics. For instance, an individual may call journalism an unethical and untrustworthy field because journalists must cross lines and bend rules in order to report stories. This paints a picture of journalism as a deceptive and demanding field of little lies, based on the individual’s own personal ethical perceptions. However, from an ethical journalistic perspective, crossing lines and bending rules is a normal part of reporting, and has no bearings on unethical practice – instead it is a part of the job, as long as privacy is not violated and lies are not being reported. Essentially, Sanders points out that

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1 See *Journalism as practice* by Sandra L. Borden; *Journalism ethics* by Elliot D. Cohen, Deni Elliott; *Ethical issues in journalism and the media* by Andrew Belsey, Ruth F. Chadwick; *Making Hard Choices in Journalism Ethics* by Sandra L. Borden, David E. Boeyink; *Groping for ethics in journalism* by Ron F. Smith and *Ethics in Journalism* by Ron Smith.

ethics must be understood in its own context, and hence ethical journalism must be understood in the context of the journalism profession.

While ethics is the main focus of her book, Sanders does not dwell too much on the theoretical and philosophical aspects of the subject, but instead brings to attention the current issues and dilemmas faced by journalists, and successful ways of tackling the issues and coming up with solutions. “Ethics and Journalism” is constructed in a very intelligent way. At first, Sanders takes a few pages to explain to the reader the fundamental understanding of ethics – from origins, and aspects, to how it has applied to journalism. Having set out this foundation, Sanders then builds the framework of her book by stating her thesis and argument in the introduction, saying that it is her ultimate goal to “put [a] critical distance between journalism and ethics by arguing that journalists are simply [not] in the business of selling newspapers or getting larger viewing figures in the same way as you’d sell a brand of soap... [instead] reporters engage in practices that can directly affect the lives of their fellow human beings...good journalism is good journalism,” (p. 11) and holds no greed, deception, or lies. Thus, through the framework of her thesis, Sanders builds the pillars of her book through exploring various different ethical dilemmas faced by journalists, and how journalistic ethics address and deal with such issues. Be it lying to tell stories, or invading a person’s privacy, or creating fake sources, or dealing with a story that may cause conflict of interest, Sanders explains such dilemmas, but more importantly, brings in examples and practices on how such issues can be avoided or resolved. “Ethics and Journalism” is a comprehensive review of the main approaches of achieving ethical journalism in all areas and media of reporting.

In a nutshell, this book is an extensive discussion on the strategies of what makes good journalism. A well known quote states that “it takes years to build trust, but only seconds to lose it” and this can be particularly true in the field of journalism, where the smallest mistakes on the part of the journalist create a lifetime of mistrust from the audience. Therefore, Sanders explores the issue of trust, and how journalists can build a good rapport and use ethical journalism to their advantage.

The book chapters cover three main areas of interest. In chapters one to three, Sanders explores the origins, and philosophical frameworks of ethics and ethical enquiry, especially those dealing with Western traditions of journalism. The next chapters, four to eleven, specifically examine in detail the different types of ethical challenges faced by journalism – issues such

as lying, the freedom scope, faking the news, reporting on private lives, reporting disasters and destruction, conflicts of interest, and so on. Finally, the last three chapters, twelve to fourteen, can be called the golden chapters of the book as they set out the solutions and guidelines for achieving ethical journalism, and becoming the “good journalist reporting good journalism.”

What one will automatically find when reading this book is the ease of its understanding. Many times, such theoretical and skill building books are packed with too much information and resources, and fail to address the audience, leaving readers frustrated or bored. “Ethics and Journalism” is not this type of book. While the book is full of very useful and well researched information and resources, Sanders’ approach in her chapters provides readers with an easy to follow scheme, followed by many contemporary examples and references from literature and film. Along with such great contemporary examples, Sanders also includes interviews with some of the top journalists and editors in the world. But, perhaps above all this, one of the greatest bonuses to the book is the excellent and extensive list of sources found in the bibliography – from websites, to books, to journals – that readers can further search for, and read.

“Ethics and Journalism” written by Karen Sanders is what one could call the “go to book” in understanding ethical journalism, and clearing up the much misunderstood concepts and areas of this field of study. It is important to point out however, that this book is not a handbook on ethics, but rather, Sanders hopes it to be a tool that “will help to expand the moral imagination, making the case that moral choices constitute a significant and not indifferent part of human existence.” (p. 11-12). This book makes for an excellent source for teaching journalism and media studies classes, and as a textbook, students can benefit immensely from its rich content and well built structure and research. With its clear and laid out format, and excellent list of contemporary examples and extensive sources, “Ethics and Journalism” will assist students, readers, and the general public in understanding the dimensions of ethical issues, especially in the field of journalism where pressure and competition can lead journalists to doing wrong things. At the end of the day, that is really all that really matters – doing the right thing.