

# Journalists explore the ethical boundaries between journalism and activism

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Recent social movements have increased global activism, rekindling the ethical controversy surrounding a journalist's ability to participate in activism while remaining truthful in their reporting. Journalists and researchers debate whether journalism is an act of activism itself and what ethical boundaries exist between a journalist expressing their humanity and personal beliefs through activism and effectively fulfilling their roles as unbiased reporters of fact.

Journalism's primary role is to provide important and truthful information to the public to ensure democracy and justice are upheld. The Society of Professional Journalists provide a similar definition within their [Codes of Ethics](#), stating that "the duty of a journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues."

Yet the reliability of journalists have been called into question in the last decade, resulting in greater public distrust in the media. Jan-Werner Müller, a political philosopher and Princeton University professor, explained this shift in his article, "[Can journalists be activists?](#)", in which he discussed a new belief in two-sided journalism.

"As many media critics have rightly pointed out, the traditional practice of mechanically reproducing 'both sides' of a political dispute often distorts reality," Müller wrote. "Portraying such an asymmetrical situation as symmetrical creates the appearance of traditional journalistic objectivity at the expense of truth."

He goes on further to describe a new public desire for objectivity in journalistic reporting. People currently want information untouched from bias or partisanship, but Müller claims this push is shifting media further away from truthful reporting as media organizations are concerned by appearing too conservative or too liberal.

This fear of partisanship has also kept news organizations from relying on activist journalists for information. Activists' involvement in journalism ethically threatens the media's credibility, and

the journalist cannot claim to be objective when they are making their personal beliefs in political or social matters well-known. Müller reframes the conversation of ethics of journalism and activism, however, by focusing on distinguishing reporting and advocacy from one another. He writes that “both practices have to rely on facts, and both ask their audiences to keep an open mind. While reporters' primary emphasis is on informing, advocates focus on reforming; but that goal need not bar them from doing investigative work – on the contrary, it is often what gives such work its force.”

The last few years have yielded studies that explore the intersection between journalists and activists to better understand the impact advocacy can have on journalistic reporting. The University of Texas's Center for Media Engagement conducted such research in their 2022 case study, [“Can Journalists also be Activists?”](#), which investigates the multiple opinions this ethical dilemma provides. The case study never provides a clear answer to their question, but Kat Williams, a graduate research associate for the university's Media Ethics Initiative, spoke about her personal research with the topic.

“I think that journalists can be activists,” Williams said. “I think journalists are citizens just as much as everybody else, regardless of what job title they hold.”

Williams went on to explain that she personally believes journalism is inherently activism and, though advocacy and reporting have a distinction, the two don't have to be entirely separated from each other.

“The objectivity or the neutrality model of journalism is newer,” Williams reflected. “I feel like a lot of Americans tend to think or assume that that's the way journalism has always been done. And I don't believe that that is the case.”

Historically, journalistic reporting was relied upon to keep the government accountable and to inform the public of any abuses of power. This watch-dog reporting led to monumental changes in our society and politics, and journalists were often at the forefront of these historical shifts.

Williams described journalism as “a cornerstone of democracy because it precisely informs us about abuses of power. That, in and of itself, seems like an activist endeavor to me.”

Historical changes occur daily. Global conflicts and politics are greatly publicized, and news organizations have begun to rely more on activist journalists to obtain on the ground information. Williams and her co-authors, Kerry O'Malley Gleim and Scott R. Stroud, broached this idea by discussing the Black Lives Matter Movement in 2020 when journalists began publicly advocating for their beliefs. This pattern of involvement has continued with the conflict in Gaza and war in Ukraine. These issues have incredibly high global attention, and the ethical proceedings of journalists has become even more scrutinized as media coverage grows.

These conflicts have impacted journalism and ethical interpretations worldwide. There's been greater understanding and push for activist journalists abroad than in the United States as countries undergoing social unrest rely on their reporting to enact change and keep informed on the political climate.

Israeli university researchers Zvi Reich and Avshalom Ginosara published a study in 2020, [“Obsessive-Activist Journalists: A New Model of Journalism?”](#) to discuss this new model of journalism. They defined obsessive-activist journalists as reporters “motivated by a strong sense of justice and a passion to make a significant change” who “promote their social or political agenda in both spheres: the professional and the public.” They reflect that unlike other interventionist models of journalism, obsessive-activist journalists hybridize mainstream news reporting by creating new routes to adjust to and survive the ever changing news environment.

Ginosara and Reich state that in addition to obsessive-activist journalists' effectiveness, the model adheres “most of the time to traditional journalistic norms and practices,” dismantling some of the arguments against its credibility.

However, the American push for clear objectivity is strong. “I feel like the reason some folks want objectivity and neutrality is so they can sort of trust that they're only getting the facts, and they're sort of not getting propaganda,” Williams reflected. “But it seems to me, I would argue

that no matter what you can't get away from, bias is always going to be there in some form or another.”

Williams concluded by saying, “I think, at least in terms of where American journalism is already at, most of the news outlets are already very clearly partisan, whether they want to admit that or not.” This ethical quandary leads to an even larger question; is journalistic objectivity even possible?

Kiva Hanson, a reporter for the Madras Pioneer and Central Oregonian publications, wrote about the topic in 2019 when she attended the University of Oregon. In her article, “[How being an activist makes me a better journalist](#)”, Hanson states that “journalists cannot remain the mythically objective observers some think we should be.”

Now entered the journalistic field, Hanson still agrees with her opinion piece from five years ago. “Objectivity is a falsity,” she said. “Being objective in life is too binary and doesn’t allow reporters to be people.”

Hanson’s article argues that by displaying more empathy and advocacy in journalists’ reporting, the divide between the public and the media will lessen. She recognizes the controversy with this opinion and the nuances that come with this ethical question, but she also emphasizes the importance of impactful but truthful and accurate reporting.

“This, I feel, expresses why journalists must be activists,” Hanson wrote. “If journalists are not saying something, searching for the truth and searching for justice, what is the point of their work?”

Hanson currently expressed the importance of serving a community and understanding the role of a journalist. “Reporting becomes your identity,” she expressed, “but it’s important to separate your feelings from what you’re actively reporting on.”

This leads to the consideration of ethical boundaries between being an activist and being a journalist. For news organizations and active journalists, it's necessary to recognize where the hypothetical line is between these identities and what specific guidelines must be followed to ensure reliable and impactful reporting.

Kelly McBride is a journalist at NPR's Center for Ethics and well regarded for her knowledge in journalism ethics. She published an opinion article in 2021 titled, "[New NPR Ethics Policy: It's OK For Journalists To Demonstrate \(Sometimes\)](#)", where she dissected the newly implemented ethics policy surrounding NPR journalists' advocacy participation. Her analysis was comprehensive, but ultimately, it concluded each ethical situation is circumstantial. McBride emphasized open communication between a journalist and their news organization to ensure the journalist is aware of the ethical guidelines and there is no confusion in what is expected of the journalist.

McBride wrote that "in practice, NPR journalists will have to discuss specific decisions with their bosses, who in turn will have to ask a lot of questions." She specifies that "protests organized with the purpose of demanding equal and fair treatment of people are now permitted, as long as the journalist asking is not covering the event. However, rallies organized to support a specific piece of legislation would be off-limits. Other events featuring a slate of political candidates from one party are also out of bounds."

News organizations like NPR are trying to be more transparent with their journalists about what they can ethically do, but their decisions involve a difficult balancing between profession and personal life. Morally, a journalist may feel the personal need to advocate for a cause, but ethically, they may create a conflict of interest in their reporting, causing both the journalist and the organization to be questioned for reliability.

Patricia Aufderheide, a documentarian and communications professor at American University, is currently researching this concept of journalism and activism. She said, "I think the question to answer would be what are you an activist about and why."

Similarly to McBrides' conclusion, Aufderheide recognizes that ethical boundaries are circumstantial and require a close inspection of the activism a journalist wants to involve themselves into.

Williams similarly expressed that the ethical boundaries are defined between the employer and the employee. She said, "I think the question that should take priority for journalists is less about, is it ethical for me to do this? I think the larger question is, is it worthwhile? Am I going to be giving up? What would I call it? Am I going to be giving up my job?"

Journalists who hope to pursue a strong reporting career and impactful advocacy will need to proceed with great care if they wish to be successful. Sacrifices are often made due to the ethical difficulties of being an activist journalist. Many journalists who desire to be activists leave the profession altogether to properly dedicate themselves to their beliefs. However, the research has shown it's not impossible to advocate while reporting as long as truth and accuracy remain at the forefront of the story.

Ethics ensure there is no correct answer to a dilemma, and disagreements within the industry will be a constant. But perhaps there will be a societal shift towards advocacy in reporting rather than hoping for objective neutrality in every news organization.

The journalistic world will just have to wait and see.