

The principle that seems to unify the above findings is journalists' belief that their autonomy is important, that they must make independent decisions about how to gather news and what to report. The autonomy principle also explains journalists' wariness about accepting free travel (they do not want to be beholden to a source), their near-unanimous refusal to consider violating a promise of confidentiality to a source (having decided that confidentiality is important in a given instance, they won't change their mind), and their very strong belief that personal ethical standards rather than anything else is the prime component in ethical decision-making.

It is important not to overstate the case, however. Legal prohibitions did matter. Although substantial minorities of journalists were willing to break the law when they thought it necessary, most were not. And the possibility of being sued was an important factor in ethical decision-making for many journalists, although its strength was less than that of personal ethical standards.

It should be kept in mind, of course, that the journalists were responding to hypothetical situations. How they would react if faced with a real choice about a concrete situation might be quite different.

Discussion

This study of Canadian journalists uncovered two principal findings. First, almost all of the survey's respondents said they would never break a promise of confidentiality to a source. Although there were some differences between reporters and transcriptionists as to the kinds of behaviors that could sometimes be justified, the similarities between the two groups were far more striking than the differences.