



# Legal Issues in Journalism: Navigating Free Speech and Privacy

Akwagiobe Richard Akpanke and Aminu Bakori Mohammed

Faculty of Law Kampala International University Uganda

## ABSTRACT

Journalists today operate within an intricate web of legal and ethical considerations, balancing the competing demands of free speech and privacy. This paper investigates the legal principles governing these rights, their historical development, and their modern applications across different jurisdictions. Drawing on case studies and legal precedents, the discussion highlights how journalists can navigate privacy expectations while upholding public interest. Ethical considerations, including the role of integrity, accuracy, and accountability, are also examined as key to fostering responsible journalism. Finally, the paper anticipates future trends in media law, shaped by technological advancements and evolving societal norms, and underscores the importance of informed decision-making in creating journalism that is both ethical and legally sound.

**Keywords:** Free speech, privacy law, journalism ethics, First Amendment, public interest, media law.

## INTRODUCTION

Today, journalists must navigate a myriad of contradictory legal principles as they work. They must balance the values of free speech and a free press with the special privacy rights enjoyed by individuals. The question of which legal norms should prevail, in which instances, and what interests those norms should serve has embroiled the community of legal scholars, judges, and practitioners of journalism for years. Journalists would be well served to be acutely aware of these tensions, their sources, and their potential repercussions. While the constitutional framework within which laws governing press freedom might exist has existed in the United States for over 230 years, with modern law still governed by interpretations of the First Amendment, the specifics of laws and legal principles about journalists have evolved [1, 2]. This project will provide an overview of the legal issues most pertinent to contemporary practitioners of journalism. It will call attention to the historical and contemporary cases, legislation, and conflicts that inform the state of play today. To be clear, our legal system is a vast and dynamic undertaking. It would be impossible not to oversimplify a great deal. That said, the discussion that follows should offer young journalists a starting point from which to frame their perspective on contemporary law and modern legal reality. As a practical matter, many of these laws can carry very specific and natural consequences for journalists and their sources. Journalists must have a basic understanding of these laws if they are to avoid prosecution, minimize liability, and produce work that is responsible to individuals and society as a whole [3, 4].

### The Intersection of Free Speech and Privacy Laws

At first glance, free speech rights might seem at odds with privacy laws. One of the main issues that journalists must navigate is where to draw the line. This varies by jurisdiction, but even within countries, the outcome of a particular lawsuit can give conflicting guidance. At the highest level, the United States protects free speech under the First Amendment, allowing for the publication of private individuals' lives that may be in the public interest. Europe approaches the issue differently, and there are entire privacy laws—both in individual nations as well as continentally—to restrict the right to do so. However, U.S. jurisdiction has also recognized a 'right to narrative,' which gives a cause of action only if privacy is violated to the point that personal history-telling is harmed. European countries' approach to privacy violation can prevent point-blank publishing in a wider variety of contexts [5, 6]. Underlying the This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited

intersection of journalism and privacy, there are three general factors on which prevailing legal opinions to address privacy torts and non-consensual dissemination have emerged from some courts: if the plaintiff had a legitimate expectation of privacy that was violated if something is private, and to what extent the communication detail is important to the report (by and large, the broader the allegation, the more likely lesser detail would be viewed as necessary). One case highlights how difficult and contextually variable the third factor—the extent of public concern—is: While much about an assault might not be newsworthy, the false allegations and evidentiary shortcomings involved in a case can render greater detail more newsworthy. Many judges have commented on the context-specific nature of that line drawing. The law has only recently grappled with heightened privacy expectations online and reactive and scandalizing dissemination. As a matter of public relations and journalism ethics, this also resonates. To the extent that an issue is live in society, journalists need to provide some news value from their reporting campaign in that area, while at the same time being careful not to feed ignominious rumors that lead 'the public' to participate in the exploitation of victims [7, 8].

### **Case Studies and Analysis**

In mid-2019, two major privacy cases were brought to court involving competing rights: the right to free speech and the right to privacy. Decisions in the cases are awaited. These examples are drawn from real-life situations where free speech and privacy rights intersect and where understanding your legal responsibilities can become significant. Treat them as cautionary tales. They might stop you from making similar mistakes [9, 10]. But before you dive in, take a bit of time. Think of these two cases as the type of case where legal decisions are made and consider the courts' reasoning in the Harald case in particular. Have their brains exploded coming up with their decisions? Or is it all quite predictable? Can you think of a recent story that may have influenced the outcome of the Harald case that the example here might not have? Would you agree or disagree with its impact? Normally, when the standards of privacy were dealt with in tort cases, they were accompanied by an intrusion of solitude. The reading of the newspaper article did not cause any sort of intrusion into the plaintiff's private life. In this case, the newspaper and the journalist were not at fault because they had reported the story to protect the public by warning the readers of the dangers that may be created by hazards [11, 12].

### **Ethical Considerations in Reporting**

Several ethical considerations go along with legal rights for journalists. Journalists need to balance conflicting ideas about what is right. Ethics do not always equal the law, nor do they always require the law; for example, people do not have individual legal rights to autonomy to the exclusion of safety. At the same time, when a person's right to privacy bumps up against a journalist's right to free speech, the journalist has to decide how to proceed. This is precisely the point of view that journalists must also consult their consciences, which tells them that when privacy and the press collide, privacy will always be a paramount concern [13, 14]. Questions of media law show us a similar view that journalists must reconcile the competing principles of individual autonomy and preventing harm to others. Privacy and the public's "right to know" sometimes come into conflict. The public's right to know might support publication, yet respect for individual dignity and privacy rights might count against it. One way to begin sorting this out is to adhere to the standards outlined by journalism ethics organizations or to remember responsibly five normative principles: truth, accuracy, responsibility, equality, and integrity. Properly considered and applied, any of these sources need not be read simplistically to condemn publication or to support it. They are more likely to guide thinking and action. Finally, these authorities are councils of prudence. They respect individual autonomy and judge publication by the degree of autonomy threat it poses. They do not reduce privacy rights to a principle that trumps free speech. They remind journalists that, in a broader view, winning the public's trust is better secured through the integrity of the message and the trustworthiness of the messenger than through gaining notoriety for being first with a sensational story. In cases involving potential privacy violations, we consult further guidelines of fairness and transparency [15, 16]. Journalists, philosophy students and teachers, the public, and privacy victims rarely see in terms of autonomous privacy a warrant for publication. Think of cases in which news-gatherers struggle over whether to respect an individual's plea for privacy or to make public facts about a person that could embarrass or shame them. A family of a gay man who wanted his sexual orientation kept private when alive is asking for help from news-gatherers to keep it from being published now that he is dead. They make that request out of respect for his feelings, rather than their privacy. When the media finally announced historic bravery some 50 years after his death because of his homosexuality, his family members were neither consulted nor notified. This struggle and the harm privacy is made to prevent is important in fostering respect for the dignity of the individual and the capacity for respect for

others. Discernment and reflection are necessary for prudential judgments about privacy. For all of these reasons, a decision to publish is respectful of journalists' autonomy in the pursuit of disclosing truths, bearing self-responsibility for the costs of doing so, and performing public-service journalism. While not always a legal or ethical requirement, publication combined with respect for privacy moots claims for harm coming from the exposure of secret shame or when the freedom to resolve such issues sadly goes to the grave with us. It dodges hypocrisy that disrespects the dignity of a person, in death, as well as life, by failing to extend to them the same autonomy to which we grant ourselves. The unfolding of these examples calls for understanding decision-making that is attentive to both the journalist and the public, making a public case in a way that allows readers or viewers to have the necessary information to evaluate what is done in their name as much as what is done to the subject of the news report [17, 18].

#### Future Trends

We know first-hand that the law can have a big impact on journalism, and we hope that this essay will benefit other journalists. We believe we have laid out some specific ways that this understanding can help others navigate the complexities that come with modern journalism. At the same time, some of the influences of the law are more ambiguous today than ever, as old legal codes and standards are adapting to new media and new societal privacy norms. Even as these laws evolve, they too are sometimes influenced by the work produced by journalists, lawyers, and judges. This will certainly be an ongoing challenge for journalists. If there is one lesson, we can offer above all in this essay, there is a compelling need for collaboration between legal and design thinking experts [19, 20]. Finally, we believe that real attention to both ethics and the law makes us better equipped to produce a strong product in the end; if we push ourselves to be as informed and reflective as possible, we have the opportunity to create a new kind of journalism. What does the future hold for the relationship between journalism and the law? In the future, we will no doubt continue to see a tension between exponential technological potential and linear change in legal settings. However, we will also likely see a general trend toward increased divergence between these extreme examples. As noted earlier, cultural attitudes about "taking offense" seem to be eroding in some areas, even though that cultural sensibility is enshrined in the law in several of the situations we have surveyed. New media and new ways of communicating are pushing the boundaries of "free speech." New technologies seem to be providing fewer and fewer enforceable privacy protections on national and international levels [21, 22].

#### CONCLUSION

Journalism stands at a complex intersection of law and ethics, where the rights to free speech and privacy frequently collide. This article has outlined the core legal principles and ethical guidelines that shape journalistic practices, emphasizing the need for awareness, reflection, and adherence to professional values. By examining contemporary cases and their broader implications, it is evident that informed decision-making is critical for navigating these challenges effectively. The evolution of digital technologies and changing societal attitudes present both opportunities and dilemmas for journalists, requiring continuous adaptation and collaboration with legal experts. Ultimately, journalism that respects both the law and ethical standards not only upholds individual dignity but also strengthens public trust, paving the way for a responsible and resilient media landscape.

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