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Loyalty: Choosing between Competing Allegiances

By the end of this chapter, you should:

- understand why the articulation of loyalties is important in professional ethics.
- know Royce's definition of loyalty and at least one of the major problems with that conceptualization.
- understand how journalists' role in society provides them with an additional set of loyalties to consider.
- be familiar with and able to use the Potter Box as a justification model for ethical decision making.

LOYALTY AS PART OF THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

Decisions involving loyalty occur routinely for media professionals. When journalists make a decision to air or not to air a story, they have decided to whom they will be loyal. When recording executives cancel the contract of a controversial artist to avoid a boycott, they have chosen a loyalty. In fact, most ethical decisions come down to the question "To whom (or what) will I be loyal?"

The original discussion of loyalty in Western culture was written by Plato in *The Trial and Death of Socrates* (see Russell 1967). In Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates bases his defense against the charges brought against him on his loyalty to divinely inspired truth. When asked by his accusers if he will stop teaching philosophy, Socrates responds:

Men of Athens, I honor and love you: but I shall obey God rather than you, and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting any one whom I meet. . . . For know that this is the command of God; and I believe that no greater good has ever happened in the State than my service to God.

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While the word *loyalty* is not present in English translations of the *Phaedo*, the overall tone of the work is a tribute to loyalty, in this case a willingness to die for a cause.

Social contract theorist Thomas Hobbes was the first major Western philosopher to assert that God did not have to be the focus of loyalty. In his historic work, *The Leviathan*, Hobbes asserted loyalty is a social act (Socrates saw it as political) and asserted that the agreement allows people to form a "social contract" that is the basis of society. Unlike Socrates, Hobbes acknowledged that people could have more than one loyalty at a time and might, at certain times, be forced to choose among them—a notion most philosophers hold today.

Hobbes, unlike Socrates, also asserted that loyalty has limits. Loyalty to the ruler stops when continued loyalty would result in a subject's death—the loyalty to self-preservation being higher than loyalty to the ruler. The turmoil surrounding U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War is a classic example of this type of conflicting loyalties.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF JOSIAH ROYCE

American theologian Josiah Royce, who taught at Harvard in the early 1900s, believed that loyalty could become the single guiding ethical principle. In *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (1908), Royce wrote, "My theory is that the whole moral law is implicitly bound up in one precept: 'Be loyal.'" Royce defined loyalty as a social act: "The willing and practical and thoroughgoing devotion of a person to a cause." Royce would be critical, therefore, of the journalist who gets a story at all costs and whose only loyalty is to himself or the public relations professional who lets loyalty to an employer cause her to bend the truth in press releases or annual reports. To Royce, loyalty is an act of choice. A loyal person, Royce asserted, does not have "Hamlet's option"—or the leisure not to decide. For in the act of not deciding, that person has essentially cast his loyalty.

Loyalty also promotes self-realization. Royce spent much of his academic career fascinated with the new Freudian psychology and he viewed loyalty in its light. As a person continued to exercise loyalty, Royce believed, he or she would develop habits of character that would result in systematic ethical action. Like other aspects of moral development (see the last chapter of this book), loyalty can be learned and honed, Royce believed.

Loyalty as a single ethical guide has problems. *First*, loyalty, incompletely conceived, can be bias or prejudice thinly cloaked. *Second*, few people maintain merely a single loyalty and if loyalty is to become a guiding ethical principle, we need to develop a way to help distinguish among competing loyalties. *Third*, in a mass society, the concept of face-to-face loyalty has lost much of its power. *Finally*, is the most troubling question of whether it is ethical to be loyal to an unethical cause, for example racism or gender discrimination.

However, Royce suggested a way to determine whether a specific cause was worthy of loyalty. A worthy cause should harmonize with the loyalties of others within the community. For instance, the loyalty of the journalist should be in harmony with

the loyalty of the reader. The loyalty of the advertising agency should not conflict with the loyalty of either its client or the consumer. Our loyalty to free and unfettered political discussion as the basis of modern democracy and journalism meets Royce's test of loyalty but has started much debate over campaign finance laws.

To Royce, the true problem of loyalty as an ethical principle was not the poor choice of loyalties but failure to adhere to proper loyalties: "The ills of mankind are largely the consequence of disloyalty rather than wrong-headed loyalty" (Royce 1908). Causes capable of sustaining loyalty, Royce noted, have a "super-individual" quality, apparent when people become part of a community. A spirit of democratic cooperation is needed for Royce's view of loyalty to result in ethical action. For instance, advertising agencies demonstrate an ethical loyalty when they view their role as providing needed information for intelligent consumer choice, but more often they opt for loyalty to the bottom line because they suspect that competing agencies do.

Royce's thought has been criticized on a number of grounds. First, some philosophers assert that Royce's concept of loyalty is simplistic and that the adoption of loyalty as a moral principle may lead to allegiance to troubling causes. For instance, the advertising copywriter who scripts distorted television spots about a political opponent in the belief that she must get her candidate elected is demonstrating a troubling allegiance to a politician over the democratic process. Similarly, a reporter who must get the story first, regardless of its completeness or accuracy, would be demonstrating a misplaced loyalty to beating the competition.

Second, others have noted that Royce provides no way to balance among conflicting loyalties. Media professionals such as journalists are faced daily with a barrage of potential loyalties—the truth, the audience, the sources, the bottom line, the profession—and choosing among them is among the most basic of ethical decisions. Other professions have similar dilemmas such as the documentarian who must be loyal to the truth in her art while at the same time being loyal to the producers who want large numbers of the ticket-buying public to see the final product.

Third, it is unclear how Royce's ethical thinking would balance majority notions against minority views. Strictly interpreted, Royce's notion of loyalty could inspire adherence to the status quo or strict majority rule. For instance, advertisements that stereotype groups of people despite evidence to the contrary help perpetuate incorrect images. The ads work because they appeal to the majority, but by stereotyping, they have crowded out more accurate impressions.

Yet despite these criticisms, Royce's thought has much to recommend it. First, Royce speaks to the development of ethical habits. Second, Royce reminds us that the basis of loyalty is social and loyalty requires we put others on an equal footing with ourselves. Most important is the overriding message of Royce's work: *when making ethical choices, it is important to consider what your loyalties are and how you arrived at those loyalties.*

JOURNALISM AS A PROFESSION

Loyalty is not a fixed point but a range within a continuum. In *Loyalty: An Essay on the Morality of Relationships*, Fletcher (1993) identifies two types of loyalty. The first is minimal: "Do not betray me." The second is maximal: "Be one with me."

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Between these two poles is a range of possibilities for allegiance and for corresponding media behavior. The location on the continuum for YouTube will differ from that of *The Nation* magazine.

One of the problems modern news media face is that a large percentage of the U.S. public subscribes to the notion that if the media are not maximally loyal—that is, one with government, the military and so forth—then they are traitorous. The media have been called disloyal by politicians, often for no greater sin than fulfilling the watchdog role.

Loyalty can be linked to role. A role is a capacity in which we act toward others. It provides others with information about how we will act in a structured situation. Some roles are occupationally defined—account executive, screenwriter, editor. Others are not: mother, spouse, daughter. We all play multiple roles and they help us to define ourselves and to know what is expected of us and others.

When the role you assume is a professional one, you add the ethical responsibilities of that role. Philosophers claim that "to belong to a profession is traditionally to be held to certain standards of conduct that go beyond the norm for others" (Lebacqz 1985, 32) and journalism qualifies as one of those professions with a higher expected norm of conduct.

However, not all journalists agree in practice. Hodges (1986) makes the distinction in this manner: when asked what she does for a living, one journalist says, "I am a journalist" while another says "I work for the *Gazette*." Hodges claims the first speaker recognizes her responsibility as a professional while the latter merely acknowledges her loyalty to a paycheck. The first would be expected to be loyal to societal expectations of a journalist, the second may or may not.

Journalists and their employers have debated whether journalism should be considered a profession. Advocates of professionalism assert that professionalism among journalists will provide them with greater autonomy, prestige and financial rewards. Critics see the process of professionalization as one that distances readers and viewers from the institutions that journalists often represent.

Despite these debates, we sense that journalists have two central responsibilities that are distinct in modern society. First, they have a greater responsibility to tell the truth than members of most professions. Second, journalists also seem to carry a greater obligation to foster political involvement than the average person.

Philosophers note that while ethical dilemmas are transitory, roles endure. Role expectations carry over from one situation to another. Loyalty to the profession means loyalty to the *ideals* of the profession. To Aristotle, loyalty to a profession also would mean maintaining high professional standards. The Aristotelian notion of virtue means being the best television producer or advertising executive you can be in the belief that you are being loyal to the profession and its ideals.

CONFLICTING LOYALTIES

As you can see, we are no longer talking about merely a single loyalty. We live in an age of layers of loyalties, creating added problems and complications.

Sorting through competing loyalties can be difficult, particularly when loyalties in one role appear to conflict with the loyalties of another. Much has been

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written about this issue and we have adapted one such framework from William F. May (2001), who outlined these layers of loyalties for college professors, but they are adaptable to those who work in the media. He offers four types of loyalty.

1. Loyalties arising from shared humanity:

- demonstrate respect for each person as an individual.
- communicate honestly and truthfully with all persons.
- build a fair and compassionate environment that promotes the common good.

2. Loyalties arising from professional practice:

- fulfill the informational and entertainment mission of the media.
- understand your audience's needs.
- strive to enhance professional development of self and others.
- avoid the abuse of power and position.
- conduct professional activities in ways that uphold or surpass the ideals of virtue and competence.

3. Loyalties arising from employment:

- keep agreements and promises, operate within the framework of the law and extend due process to all persons.
- do not squander your organization's resources or your public trust.
- promote compassionate and humane professional relationships.
- foster policies that build a community of ethnic, gender and socioeconomic diversity.
- promote the right of all to be heard.

4. Loyalties arising from the media's role in public life:

- serve as examples of open institutions where truth is required.
- foster open discussion and debate.
- interpret your professional actions to readers and viewers.
- serve as a voice for the voiceless.
- serve as a mirror of society.

The problem of conflicting loyalties is evident in reality that most media professionals work for a corporation. They owe at least some loyalty to their corporate employers. However, such loyalty seldom involves a face-to-face relationship. Corporations demand employee loyalty but are much less willing to be loyal in return. The fear is that one's allegiance to the organization will advance the interest of the organization without any reciprocal loyalty to the employee. This is particularly true in the first years of this century when many news organizations, particularly newspapers, are going out of business or facing severe economic cutbacks.

Most ethical decisions, however, are not about loyalties to corporations or loyalty to an abstract concept such as freedom of the press or the public's right to know. Most everyday loyalty decisions are about how you treat the subject of your interview or how you consider the consumer of your advertising. Such ethical decisions bring to the forefront the notion of *reciprocity*. Simply articulated, reciprocity requires that loyalty should not work against the interest of either party.



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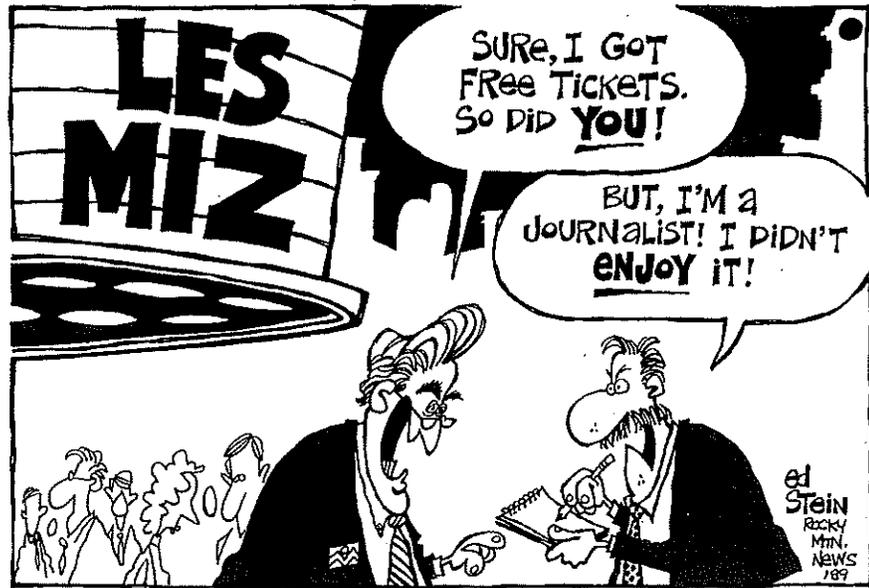
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Even in a time of shifting loyalties, there are some loyalties that should only be reluctantly abandoned such as loyalty to humanity and loyalty to truth. *Virtually no situation in media ethics calls for inhumane treatment or withholding the truth.* You can probably articulate other loyalties you would rarely, if ever, break. Even if you can't foresee every possible conflict of loyalty in your media profession, knowing where your ultimate loyalties lie is a good start to avoiding conflicts.

THE POTTER BOX

Ethical decision-making models, such as the one in Chapter 1 by Sissela Bok, help you make an ethical choice. In this chapter, you will learn a second decision-making model, one that incorporates loyalties into the reasoning process. The model was developed by Harvard theologian Ralph Potter and is called the Potter Box. Its initial use requires that you go through four steps to arrive at an ethical judgment. The case below will be used to help familiarize you with the model.

You are the assistant city editor for a newspaper of about 30,000 circulation in a western city of about 80,000. Your police reporter regularly reports on sexual assaults in the community.

While the newspaper has a policy of not revealing the names of rape victims, it routinely reports where assaults occur, the circumstances and a description of the assailant, if available.

Tonight the police reporter is preparing to write a story about a rape that occurred in the early-morning hours yesterday on the roof of the downtown bus

station. Police report that the young woman who was raped went willingly to the roof of the bus station with her attacker. Although she is 25, she lives in a group home for the educable mentally handicapped in the city, one of seven women living there.

She could not describe her assailant, and police have no suspects.

Your reporter asks you for advice about how much detail, and what detail, he should include in the story.

The Potter Box has four steps (see Figure 4.1) that should be taken in order. They are (1) understanding the facts, (2) outlining the values inherent in the decision, (3) applying relevant philosophical principles and (4) articulating a loyalty. You proceed through the four steps in a counterclockwise fashion, beginning with the factual situation and ending at loyalties. We will examine each step individually.

Step One: Understanding the facts of the case. In the scenario, the facts are straightforward. As the newspaper editor, you have the information. Your ethical choice rests with how much of it you are going to print.

Step Two: Outlining values. Values is a much abused word in modern English. People can value everything from their loved ones to making fashion statements. In ethics, however, values takes on a more precise meaning. When you value something—an idea or a principle—it means you are willing to give up other things for it. If, as a journalist, you value truth above all things, then you must sometimes be willing to give up privacy in favor of it. In the foregoing case, such a value system would mean that you would print every detail, because you value truth and would risk invading the privacy of a person who is in some important ways unable to defend herself. If, as a journalist, you value both truth and privacy, then you may be willing to give up some truth, the printing of every detail, to attempt to preserve the victim's privacy.

Values often compete and an important element of using the Potter Box is to be honest about what you really do value. Both truth and privacy are lofty ideals. A less lofty ideal that most of us value is keeping our jobs. Journalists often value getting the story first or exclusively. A forthright articulation of all the values (and there will be more than one) in any particular ethical situation will help you see more clearly the choices that you face and the potential compromises you may have to make.

Step Three: Application of philosophical principles. Once you have decided what you value, you need to apply the philosophical principles outlined in the first chapter. For example, in the previous scenario, a utilitarian might argue that the

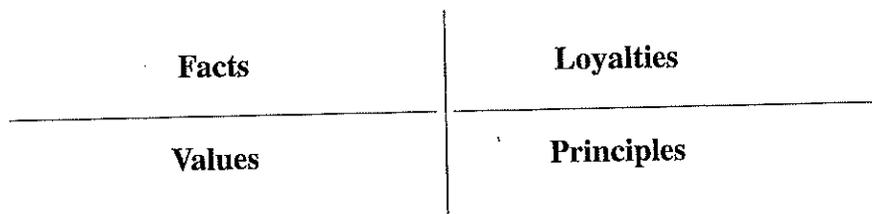


FIGURE 4.1. The Four Steps of the Potter Box

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greatest good is served by printing a story that alerts the community to the fact that some creep who rapes women who cannot defend themselves is still out there. Ross would argue that a journalist has duties both to the readers and to the victim and they must be weighed before making a decision.

Aristotle's golden mean might counsel a middle ground that balances printing every detail against printing no story at all. Kant would suggest that the maxim of protecting someone who cannot protect herself is a maxim that could be universalized, making a decision to omit some information justifiable. He would also argue to not use the woman as a means to your end—an exclusive story in this instance.

In this case, application of several ethical principles leads to the general conclusion that the newspaper should print some story, but not one that inadvertently reveals the victim's identity or that makes her out to be hopelessly naive in her trust of strangers.

However, you should be alert that while different ethical principles in this scenario lead to the same conclusion, many, if not most, ethical dilemmas may not produce such a happy result. The principles point to different and even mutually exclusive actions on your part, leaving you to decide your ultimate loyalty. But this is why the Potter Box demands that you apply more than one ethical principle, so that if (or when) they vary, you are able to explain why.

Step Four: Articulation of loyalties. Potter viewed loyalty as a social commitment and the results of using the Potter Box reflect that ethic. In the fourth step, you articulate your possible loyalties and decide whether they are in conflict. In the case above, you have a loyalty to the truth, to the community, to the girl and to your job—just for starters.

But, your loyalties are not in severe conflict with one another unless you adopt an absolutist view of the truth the community needs to know. It is possible to counsel your reporter to write a story that tells the truth but omits some facts (for example, the woman's residence in a group home and her mental retardation), alerts the community to a danger (there's a creep out there who police haven't caught), protects the victim's privacy (you won't print her name or where she lives) and allows you to take pride in the job you've done (you've told the truth and not harmed anyone).

However, use of the Potter Box often highlights a conflict between loyalties. In these instances, we refer you to Royce's concept: what you choose to be loyal to should be capable of inspiring a similar loyalty in others who are both like and unlike you. Journalists are often accused of being "out of touch" with their viewers or readers, a fact for which we are highly criticized.

Our experience with the Potter Box has been that the vast majority of ethical decisions will allow you to sustain a variety of loyalties—they are sometimes not mutually exclusive as we saw above. However, those decisions that are most troubling are ones where a loyalty becomes so dominant that you are forced to abandon other loyalties that once seemed quite essential.

While you may initially find the stepwise process of the Potter Box somewhat cumbersome, as you learn to use it you will become fluent in it. The following case study, "The Pimp, the Prostitute and the Preacher," illustrates how you might use the Potter Box when making an ethical decision.

The Pimp, the Prostitute and the Preacher

You are the court reporter for a daily newspaper in a city of about 150,000 in the Pacific Northwest. About a year ago, the local police force began to crack down on prostitutes working the downtown mall. However, the department sought to limit prostitution by arresting pimps rather than by arresting either the prostitutes or their customers. The first of those arrests has now come to trial, and your paper has assigned you to cover it.

In his opening statement, the local assistant district attorney tells the jury that in order to convict a person of pimping under state law, the state must prove first that money was exchanged for sexual favors, and second that the money was then given to a third party, the pimp, in return for protection, continued work, etc. During the first two days of the trial, he calls as witnesses four young women, ages 14 to 16, who admit they have worked as prostitutes in the city but are a great deal less clear on the disposal of their earnings. Your story after the first day of the trial summarizes the details without disclosing their names.

Near the end of the second day, the prosecutor calls as witnesses men caught paying one or more of the women to have sex with them. Among those who testify is a middle-aged man who in an almost inaudible response to a question lists his occupation as a minister at one of the more conservative Protestant churches in the city. He admits to having paid one of the young women for sex, and that day's portion of the trial ends soon after his testimony is complete.

About 45 minutes later you are back in the office to write the story when the newsroom secretary asks you if you have a few minutes to speak with "Reverend Jones." You look up and realize you are facing the minister who testified earlier. In the open newsroom he begs you, in tears and on his knees, not to print his name. He even holds out a copy of the story you wrote on page one of this morning's paper outlining why the names of the prostitutes had not been used. He asserts that, should a story with his name appear, his marriage will crumble, his children will no longer respect him and he will lose his job.

After a few minutes the paper's managing editor realizes what is happening and calls you, the minister and the news editor into his office for a conference.

Using the Potter Box, determine how you would report this story. Your decision will reflect a set of loyalties as well as the values and principles you have chosen. Others may choose differently. A justification model such as Potter's or Bok's does not eliminate differences. What it will do, ideally, is ensure that your choices are grounded in sound ethical reasoning and justifiable on demand.

When you are finished, the final casting of loyalties will inevitably create another fact for the first quadrant of the box. For instance, in this case, if the decision is to run the name, anything that might subsequently happen to the minister as a result—firing, divorce, even possible suicide—is now a hypothetical "fact" for the first quadrant of the Potter Box and you go through again. If you decide not to run the minister's name and his parishioners discover his actions, the newspaper loses credibility. This is also a "fact" to be entered into the first quadrant of the Potter Box. Considering these additional although hypothetical "facts," you may want to go through the process again to see if your decision will remain the same. (You might search the Web or see the Web site for this book for the story of Admiral Boorda, who committed suicide after it was revealed that he wore medals on his uniform he had not earned.) Regardless of your initial decision about the

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story, would the possibility of that subsequent “fact,” obviously not known to the journalist at the time, make a difference in a later use of the Potter Box?

Now that you’ve made a decision about revealing the name of the minister based on the facts, we’d like to introduce additional facts. Read them and go through the Potter Box again focusing less on the minister and more on larger issues that affect how the story is written and how it is run in the newspaper. This time, think about the notions of stereotyping, how minorities are portrayed in news reports and what exactly we mean by “objectivity” and “truth.”

As the trial continues, it becomes clear that there are other factors at work. In your largely Caucasian community, the only people arrested for pimping have been African-American. All the young women who work as prostitutes are Caucasian, as are the customers who testify. As far as prostitution goes, your Pacific Northwest version is relatively mild. There are no reports of drug use among the prostitutes and their customers, and none of the prostitutes has complained of physical violence. Further, the prosecuting attorney cannot make any of the young women admit under oath that they ever gave the pimps any money. The jury verdict in this case is not guilty.

Do the new facts change your loyalties? Do they change the way you look at the trial? If so, in what way?

We recommend that you try using both the Bok and Potter justification models at various times in your ethical decision making. Becoming a competent practitioner of both methods will provide you with greater flexibility and explanatory power. We also recommend, regardless of the approach you use, that an unvarnished and critical discussion of loyalty become part of your ethical dialogue. We believe it will enable you to anticipate situations as well as react to them.

Suggested Readings

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Cases on the Web

www.mhhe.com/mediaethics7e

- “She chose before losing the choice” by Tom Lyons
- “Standing behind a reporter: The CBS/News Journal Controversy” by John Sweeney
- “The anchor as activist” by Fred Bales
- “The wonderful world of junkets” by Ralph Barney