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## comments from the editor . . .

Ethicists tell us that as societies form there will be a group of commonly accepted beliefs that individuals identify as appropriate or inappropriate to monitor our ways of acting. For example, in most societies, it is inappropriate to steal. However, even some commonly accepted beliefs may be negotiable. It is inappropriate to steal but there is a perceived difference in “fudging on an IRS tax form,” shoplifting and bank robbery.

In most occupations a group of commonly accepted practices help direct professional behavior. Those employed in the field are expected to follow the accepted practices of the occupation. Those who do not are shunned and in some instances may be considered unemployable. Today, however, the list of unacceptable practices for people working in the media seems to be shrinking as the media utilize a variety of tactics that once would have been deemed unacceptable. Some of these excesses are blamed on the exuberance of entry-level professionals to get the story.

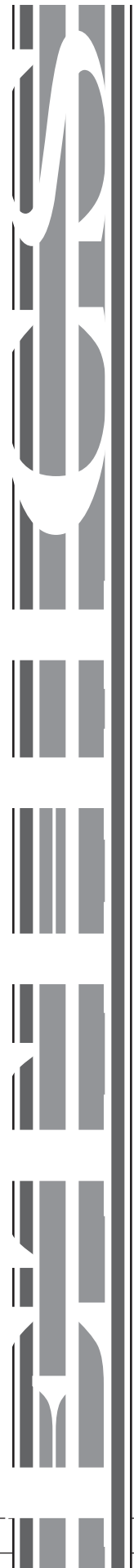
As in the past, it appears that entry-level journalists receive uneven amounts of training while in college and on the job. Warren Breed's pioneering study of a quarter-century ago said younger staff members learn "the system" by watching what their more experienced colleagues do. This informal method coupled with training programs can be useful, but many of the media do not have formalized training programs and depend on our ASJMC institutions to fit ethics instruction into an already crowded curriculum. This issue examines the teaching of mass communication ethics in a range of academic settings and from a variety of approaches.

manuscripts on ALLIANCES and the PROMOTION PROCESS for future issues  
should be submitted to

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# Learning Ethics

## ON THE JOB OR IN THE CLASSROOM?

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**T**RADITIONAL JOURNALISM FINDS ITSELF UNDER SIEGE at the beginning of the 21st century. Newspapers are undergoing ownership changes and mergers. New media outlets such as 24-hour cable news channels have fundamentally changed the way in which the traditional television network news broadcasts are produced. New forms of media such as the World Wide Web have created new outlets for information, which have been embraced by both the traditional media companies and new players in the information industries. These changes have affected local television stations and newspapers as well. In the midst of these business challenges, traditional journalism also finds itself under attack from its primary audiences – viewers and readers – on the issue of credibility. Major studies by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (“Examining our credibility,” 1998) and the Radio-Television News Directors Association (“RTNDF journalism ethics and integrity project,” 1998) found a low level of public trust in the news media. This comes at a time when university journalism and mass communications programs, the major source of entry-level journalists, are showing patterns of steady growth (Becker, et al., 1999). As a result, more people are preparing to enter a rapidly changing business at a time when people in that profession are trusted less.

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The author would also like to thank Professors Barb Hispman and Evonne Whitmore for allowing their ethics students at Kent State University to be a part of the survey.

# Working journalists get lots of advice about ethics. Critics both in and out of the Academy study it, scholars and journalism educators write about it, and citizens complain about it.

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Journalism has elements of both craft and profession. The push for journalistic professionalism in the latter half of the 20th century found its voice with the Hutchins Commission report of 1947, which set a standard for responsible professional behavior (Christians, 1999). A central element of any profession is its adherence to a common set of accepted standards. For journalism, the various sets of standards have been collected under the broad terms of “journalism ethics” or “standards and practices.” Ethics instruction is a key element of a university journalism curriculum for those schools that are accredited by the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC, 1999).

Working journalists get lots of advice about ethics. Critics both in and out of the Academy study it, scholars and journalism educators write about it, and citizens complain about it. Nonetheless, it is news managers who must make the ethical decisions that set the tone for a company’s editorial style. In recent years, these managers have placed more emphasis on critical thinking skills for newly hired employees (Mensing, 1997). This increased desire for critical thinking skills comes at a time when, as previously noted, media credibility is falling.

By virtue of their positions, most news managers should be able to identify situations that create ethical dilemmas in their newsrooms – at least those that fall under the traditional definitions of ethical concerns (e.g., privacy, confidential sources, staging of news events). By virtue of their study of ethics, most students in university journalism programs should be able to recognize the ethical dilemmas they may face in the media workplace. This study attempts to measure whether news managers and students (i.e., their soon-to-be entry-level employees) foresee the same ethical problems. To put it another way, are university journalism courses preparing graduating seniors for the ethical issues they will likely face in the newsroom? Are journalism schools teaching students to think critically about the correct things? The present study, which is the initial stage of a larger effort, is designed to explore the ethical dilemmas facing television stations and newspapers and to gauge the preparation of entry-level journalists to work in those environments.

## *Literature Review*

The decline in the public’s regard for journalism has been documented in several national surveys. According to the ASNE, attitudes of professional journalists about such industry practices as hidden cameras and the use of confidential sources are different from those of the general public (“Examining our credibility,” 1998). A Radio and Television News Directors Foundation Survey (“RTNDF journalism ethics and integrity project,” 1998) found a serious disconnect between what television news directors think and what the American public thinks. Journalism practitioners are also disconnected from the Academy (Davis and Zeigler, 1996; Medsger, 1996). Davis and Zeigler point out that journalism professors rate the performance of their students higher than journalism professionals do. Medsger found that current education trends are diametrically opposed to what newsroom supervisors think is needed to improve journalism. This apparent phenomenon applies to ethics instruction. In proposing a research agenda for journalism ethics, Shaver (1999) says there is a “profound disconnect between scholarly thinking about media ethics and the practice of ethics in the nation’s newsrooms” (p. 2).

The study of journalism ethics as a reflective approach dates back to the late 19th century. Garcia (1987) says the use of the word *ethics* first appeared in discussions of newspaper practices in 1850. At the time, journalistic standards were largely a collection of individual ideas of proper press conduct. The end of the 19th century saw a broader articulation of acceptable press behavior. Christians (1999) says the development of journalism ethics mirrored the industrialization of the press and the rise of formal journalism education. He traced the history of journalism ethics training starting with the first printing programs at Washington and Lee University in 1869 and Kansas State Agricultural College in 1873.

According to Christians, the impetus behind the establishment of university journalism programs was to “enhance [journalism’s] respectability” (p. 4). Christians outlined three growth periods of journalism ethics: Moral Philosophy at the Turn of the Century, The 20th Century Crisis in Communication Ethics (1920-1950) and the Rise of Practical Philosophy (1980 to

present). Shaver (1999) looked at the intellectual basis for American journalism ethics training and constructed three broad categories for analysis: normative/professional (ethical decisions based on accepted industry practices), communications/philosophical (ethical decisions based on Milton's ideas of the "marketplace of ideas"), and classical/philosophical (based on classic ethics theories, such as Kant, Milton, Rawls, etc.). The normative/professional model is based on sets of standards and practices that are usually articulated from within the journalism community itself. These standards were codified in various industry codes of ethics. The Kansas Editorial Association adopted the first known journalism code of ethics in 1910 (Christians, 1997).

Current journalism ethics instruction contains a mix of the three categories listed in Shaver. Lambeth, et al. (1994) found that most instruction in university journalism ethics courses is done through decision-making models using case studies. Case studies place students in situations in which they must decide how to resolve an ethical issue, often by looking at accepted or current industry norms, which tend to follow the normative/professional practices suggested by Shaver (1999). Case studies force students to adopt the role of media professionals. Whitehouse (1999) investigated whether case studies adequately develop students' critical thinking skills. She found that case studies in three popular ethics textbooks approach ethical decisions from the media managers' points of view instead of from the point of view of entry-level employees. Bugeja (1997) suggested a similar paradox in journalism ethics courses in that students are asked to analyze the values of media professionals who face tough ethical decisions when the students themselves have yet to acquire those values and experiences.

The need for critical thinking skills in entry-level employees is at the heart of the findings in the ASNE, RTNDA and SPJ surveys. Ruminski and Williams (1995) surveyed university journalism programs and found that three-quarters of them offer critical thinking instruction, yet found that most do not do so in a systematic or well-defined way. Elder and Paul (1994) write that "one learns critical thinking by doing critical thinking" (p. 2).

Authors of current journalism ethics textbooks endorse the idea of critical thinking skills (Day, 1997; Patterson and Wilkins, 1998; Black et al., 1999; Christians, et al., 1995) even when using the case study format. According to Whitehouse (1999), few studies have been conducted to determine whether a media ethics course impacts student behavior once the student leaves the classroom. Whitehouse cited a recent study of applied ethics by Brown and Kalichman (as cited in Whitehouse, 1999) that found no significant difference in the attitudes toward real-life practices between students who had completed formal ethics instruction and those who had not. Brown and Barnes (1999) found areas of significant disagreement between media professionals and broadcast journalism and advertising students on perceptions of ethical problems. Stacks and Wright (1986) found that students may be unsure of the ethical expectations when they move from the classroom into the workplace. Entry-level employees may adopt the attitudes and standards of the workplace, whether those standards are ethical or not (Robinson and O'Leary-Kelly, 1998).

Where do entry-level journalists receive their training? It appears to be a mix of university education and on-the-job training. Even here there is a hint of the disconnection between the profession and the Academy. The academic literature of the 1950s examined the journalistic training by looking at college curriculum (Ellis and Jabro, 1997), but a generation ago, much of the training, particularly at the newsroom management level, was of the on-the-job variety (Redmond, 1994). The question of where to strike the balance between formal and informal education continues. Interest in ethics is certainly not limited to broadcasters. Arant and Meyer (1997) found an increased ethical sensitivity among newspaper employees and managers over a similar survey conducted 15 years earlier.

If the ethics training entry-level journalists receive is a mixture of formal and informal instruction (i.e., in the classroom and on the job), then it is important to look at whether the "syllabi" for those two components are in sync. Given the increased interest in ethics and critical thinking, do news managers and entry-level employees anticipate the same ethical

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TABLE 1

**Comparison of mean responses  
of business and circulation pressure  
among news directors, students preparing for  
newsroom careers and all students**

PERCEPTION	News Directors	News Students	All Students
Business pressures affect ethics	2.73	3.43*	3.45**
Attracting an audience affects ethics	2.54	2.67*	2.97**

TABLE 2

**Comparison of mean responses  
of journalism ethics instruction  
among news directors, students preparing for  
newsroom careers and all students**

PERCEPTION	News Directors	News Students	All Students
School prepared me for ethical dilemmas	3.03	4.00*	3.92**
Ethics can be learned in the classroom	2.55	2.05*	2.30
Ethics can be learned in internships	2.97	4.07*	3.85**
Ethics can best be learned on the job	3.88	4.56*	4.33**

TABLE 3

**Comparison of mean responses  
of journalism education instruction  
and preparedness  
among news directors, students preparing for  
newsroom careers and all students**

PERCEPTION	News Directors	News Students	All Students
Instructors familiar with real-life ethics	2.69	4.32*	4.40**
Interns can recognize ethics problems	2.10	4.26*	4.16**

TABLE 4

**Comparison of mean responses  
of assessment of university instruction  
among news directors, students preparing for  
newsroom careers and all students**

PERCEPTION	News Directors	News Students	All Students
Schools do a good job teaching skills	2.72	4.18*	4.02**
Schools do a good job teaching thinking	2.43	3.60*	3.69**
Students need work on grammar, etc.	4.18	2.84*	2.92**

n = 60 news directors, n = 44 news students, n = 166 students

\* Means for news directors and students headed for newsroom careers are significantly different (2-tailed  $p < .05$ ).

\*\* Means for news directors and all students are significantly different (2-tailed  $p < .05$ ).

Note: The mean is calculated from a five-point Likert scale. Respondents were asked to respond on a scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree).

situations? Do journalism ethics courses prepare students to work in today's competitive television news environment, an environment in which the pressure to produce audience ratings continues to grow? This study focuses on these three research questions:

1. Do news managers' expectations for the ethical preparedness of students match the students' perceptions?
2. What are the ethical issues television news directors have faced in the six months prior to the survey?
3. What are the ethical issues college journalism students in ethics courses anticipate they will face in their first job?

### Methodology

Television news directors and students in ethics courses at three ACEJMC accredited universities were surveyed for this study. All participants were asked to respond to a series of questions regarding ethics and critical thinking skills using a five-point Likert scale. The students' questions were derived from the news directors' questionnaire with changes in question wording to reflect the students' frames of reference. News managers were asked to choose ethics dilemmas they have encountered in their newsrooms over the past six months from a closed-ended list of ethical dilemmas and scenario topics. The list was developed from the topics discussed in current ethics textbooks, current topics in the news and the researcher's personal experience as a television news manager. Students who indicated plans to work in a newsroom were asked to review the same list and indicate those they anticipate facing in their first newsroom job. Both groups were asked to rate the seriousness of the ethical dilemmas they faced or anticipate facing on a five-point Likert scale.

The news directors responded to survey forms that were faxed to subscribers of CNN Newsource, the largest television news affiliate body in the U.S. (500 subscribers). After the initial fax request and three follow-up faxes, 60 news directors returned completed survey forms. The author of this paper developed questions for the news directors' survey with assistance from Associate Professor Bob Papper, Department of Telecommunications at Ball State University, Professor David Hazinski, Grady School of Journalism at the University of Georgia, and Linda Fleischer, CNN Newsource. The news directors' data were tabulated and analyzed by the author for a presentation at the 1999 RTNDA convention in Charlotte, N.C.

Students in ethics courses at Kent State University, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the University of Nevada-

Reno were surveyed for student responses. The schools were selected from the list of ACEJMC accredited journalism programs to reflect geographic diversity. Data analysis of both surveys was conducted using SPSS. Analysis included frequency distributions of the Likert scale responses, t-test comparisons of mean responses and Pearson's correlation of the lists of observed or anticipated ethical dilemmas. Mean responses from the news directors sample were compared to the mean responses of all the students who participated in the survey as well as the subset of students who plan to pursue a newsroom career.

### Results

A total of 166 students enrolled in ethics courses at three universities (Kent State University, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the University of Nevada-Reno) responded to the student ethics survey between March 10 and March 21, 2000. Nearly 60% of the students who responded were female. Slightly over 60% of the students were in their senior year of study. Twenty-seven percent of the students surveyed (n=44) plan to work in a newsroom after graduation.

Sixty news managers responded to the professional ethics survey in September 1999. Eighty-two percent of those respondents were male. The responses represented a fairly equal distribution of Nielsen Media Index market sizes. Large market stations (1-50) accounted for 30% of the responses, medium market stations (51-125) accounted for 42% of the responses, and small market stations (126 and higher) accounted for 20%.

The results indicate significant differences between the two groups in the perceptions of ethics training and the anticipated ethical issues in the workplace.

### Responses to Research Questions

1. Do news managers' expectations for the ethical preparedness of students match the students' perceptions?

Students are more inclined to agree that business pressures and the need to attract readers or viewers adversely affect ethical behavior than the news directors (see Table 1). These findings mirror the ASNE and RTNDA studies, which indicated a level of suspicion on the part of the general public to the business pressures created by the demands of audience and circulation.

Perhaps because of their frame of reference from studying ethics in a university journalism program, the students in the survey were significantly more confident that their education has given them the ability to recognize potential ethical problems with a story or situation than the news managers were of *their* educations. There is an interesting paradox, however, when it comes to *where* that ethics instruction takes place. Both groups think the workplace is the best laboratory to learn about journalism ethics, followed by student internships/co-curricular activities and classroom instruction. However, the students are less enthusiastic than the professionals about the classroom as a vehicle for teaching ethics. Conversely, the students are more enthusiastic than the professionals about the opportunities for learning ethics on the job (see Table 2).

Fifty-three percent of news managers disagreed with the statement, "Journalism and mass communication ethics can best be learned in the classroom," while 61% of the students disagreed with the same statement. Similarly, 23% of the news directors strongly agreed with the statement, "Journalism ethics can best be learned on the job," while 51% of the students agreed with the same statement (see Appendices 4 and 6).

The enthusiasm for on-the-job ethics instruction may be misplaced. Few students who served internships or held media-related jobs during college reported any first-hand exposure or contact with ethical issues. Two-thirds of the students said they did not receive a written ethics policy. Seventy percent said they had not participated in a discussion about ethics while at the media company. Almost 60% said they had not viewed anyone

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making what the survey termed “a tough ethical decision” (see Appendix 13).

Despite the relative lack of enthusiasm for classroom ethics instruction, journalism students gave high marks to their instructors’ familiarity with real-life ethical dilemmas. The students’ assessment of their instructors’ abilities is significantly higher than the news managers’ assessments.

The relatively low rating for journalism education by journalism professionals mirrors the general tone of the SPJ report (Davis and Ziegler, 1996). In fact, the lowest mean response in this survey was that of the news directors’ responses to the statement, “Interns and entry-level hires are familiar with the ethical dilemmas that we face in today’s newsroom.” The mean

response for students preparing for newsroom careers was double that of the news managers (see Table 3).

Students and television news managers were in agreement that a university journalism program must achieve a balance between critical thinking and basic journalism skills. The news managers who responded to the survey would tilt the balance slightly in favor of critical thinking; students would tilt the balance slightly in the other direction (see Appendix 14). The two groups disagree, however, on how effectively the schools teach those skills (see Table 4).

2. What are the ethical issues television news directors have faced in the six months prior to the survey?

The ethical issues faced by television news directors are listed in descending order of frequency in Table 5.

3. What are the ethical issues college journalism students in ethics courses anticipate they will face in their first job?

The ethical issues anticipated by students in university ethics courses are listed in descending order of frequency in Table 6.

Generally speaking, the percentages of news directors who have encountered specific ethical concerns is lower than the percentages of those students who anticipate facing those concerns. Nonetheless, the two lists do show some degree of correlation ( $r = .65$ ). There are some interesting differences in how the two groups view individual ethical problems. For example, 93% of the students anticipate source/reporter conflicts during their first job; only 28% of the news managers report facing the same problem. Ninety-three percent of the students anticipate conflict of interest questions in their first job; only 49% of the news directors dealt with conflict of interest concerns.

Both groups were asked to rate the relative seriousness of the potential ethical dilemmas on the list. The mean responses on a five-point Likert scale are listed in Table 7. The ranking by the two groups of the importance of the potential ethical issues ( $r = .36$ ) is less well correlated than the ranking of the instances of the issues themselves ( $r = .65$ ).

### Discussion

The survey provides initial answers to the three research questions. The data suggest a significant disconnect between television news managers and students in university journalism ethics courses on several key issues: the impact of business pressures on decisions that may pose ethical problems, the relative importance of classroom and on-the-job ethics training, the expertise of university journalism instructors, and the ethical preparedness of entry-level television journalists. The data pro-

TABLE 5

### Percentage of news directors who have encountered specific ethical dilemmas in the six months prior to the survey

ETHICAL DILEMMA	PERCENTAGE
Lack of accuracy . . . . .	.76.7%
Live coverage of breaking events . . . . .	.65.1%
Coverage of juveniles . . . . .	.62.8%
Advertiser/sales department influence . . . . .	.62.8%
Graphic photography . . . . .	.58.1%
Conflict of interest . . . . .	.48.4%
Source/reporter relationships . . . . .	.27.9%
Privacy . . . . .	.25.6%
Hidden cameras . . . . .	.23.3%
Use of secondary sources . . . . .	.18.6%
Staged events . . . . .	.11.6%
Deception . . . . .	7.0%
Other . . . . .	0.0%

TABLE 6

### Percentage of students who anticipate specific ethical dilemmas in first job

ETHICAL DILEMMA	PERCENTAGE
Conflict of interest . . . . .	.93.2%
Source/reporter relationship . . . . .	.93.2%
Live coverage of breaking events . . . . .	.81.9%
Lack of accuracy . . . . .	.81.9%
Coverage of juveniles . . . . .	.81.9%
Advertiser/sales department influence . . . . .	.81.9%
Use of secondary sources . . . . .	.79.6%
Graphic photography . . . . .	.70.5%
Privacy . . . . .	.68.2%
Staged events . . . . .	.59.1%
Deception . . . . .	.54.5%
Hidden camera . . . . .	.45.5%
Other . . . . .	9.1%

vide some insight into the low level of exposure to ethical decision-making that interns and college-age media employees receive while on the job.

Of interest is the significant difference in how the two groups assess the importance of the various ethical dilemmas. It may be that the news directors are missing something in their own shops, or it may be that students have the wrong idea of what the job world is really like. In any case, the data suggest that the classroom and the workplace are somewhat out of sync on the specific topics that should be emphasized in an ethics course, especially when considering the normative/professional style of ethics instruction defined by Shaver (1999) in which ethical behavior is defined by accepted or preferred and agreed-upon industry practice.

The findings suggest an opportunity for media companies to provide examples, both in policy and in action, of ethical decision-making in the workplace. The findings also reinforce the need for quality media-related internships that include components of ethics and critical thinking. News managers were clear in their perception that journalism standards and practices are best learned on the job, a point on which students agree as well. It's troubling that many students saw no evidence of ethical decision-making in their internships and work experiences. Part of the student's internship evaluation might include an assessment of the exposure to accepted industry ethical standards and practices.

There are some obvious limitations in these findings, which make it difficult to generalize too far beyond this initial sample. The number of responses from news directors in this study was low. As many journalism researchers have discovered, it is becoming increasingly difficult to convince television news directors to participate in academic surveys. Students who responded to the survey are currently enrolled in ethics courses

TABLE 7  
**Comparison of mean responses among news directors and students preparing for newsroom careers for perceptions of the seriousness of ethical dilemmas**

PERCEPTION	News Directors	News Students
Live coverage of breaking events	4.09	3.92
Coverage of juveniles	3.48	3.97
Use of graphic photos/video	3.24	3.38
Lack of accuracy	3.20	4.36*
Source/reporter relationships	3.00	3.90*
Use of secondary sources	2.81	3.50*
Conflict of interest	2.75	4.02*
Violation of privacy	2.63	3.97*
Advertiser/sales department influence	2.59	3.86*
Deception	2.05	3.88*
Hidden cameras	2.22	2.96*

n = 60 news directors, n = 44 news students

\* Means for news directors and students headed for newsroom careers are significantly different (2-tailed p<.05).

Note: The mean is calculated from a five-point Likert scale. Respondents were asked to respond on a scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree).

so they are immersed in the topic of ethics. This may account for their heightened awareness of ethical issues, particularly those they say they anticipate encountering in their first job.

The survey raises questions about where journalism ethics should be taught and, by extension, what the coursework should be. Based on the results of this preliminary study, both news professionals and students favor an even balance of basic journalism skills and critical thinking skills in a university journalism education. This study suggests the need for further research into

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APPENDIX 1

**Business or competitive situations make it tough for today's journalists to follow ethical standards**

PERCEPTION n = 60 news directors, n = 166 students	News Directors	News Students
Strongly Agree	0.0%	11.8%
Agree	36.7%	45.3%
Neutral	21.7%	24.2%
Disagree	20.0%	13.7%
Strongly Disagree	21.7%	5.0%
MEAN	2.73	3.45*
SD	1.18	1.03

APPENDIX 2

**The toughest ethical problems in the newsroom surface in the form of promotions designed to attract viewers and/or readers**

PERCEPTION n = 60 news directors, n = 158 students	News Directors	News Students
Strongly Agree	0.0%	5.7%
Agree	20.0%	24.1%
Neutral	20.0%	37.3%
Disagree	51.7%	27.8%
Strongly Disagree	6.7%	5.1%
MEAN	2.54	2.97*
SD	.90	.98

APPENDIX 3

**My education (prepared/is preparing) me to handle tough ethical dilemmas in the media workplace**

PERCEPTION n = 60 news directors, n = 161 students	News Directors	News Students
Strongly Agree	15.5%	21.7%
Agree	20.7%	55.3%
Neutral	24.1%	16.8%
Disagree	31.0%	5.6%
Strongly Disagree	8.6%	6.0%
MEAN	3.03	3.92*
SD	1.23	.81

\* Means are significantly different (2-tailed p<.05). The mean is calculated from a five-point Likert scale. Respondents were asked to respond on a scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree).

the attitudes of media professionals. The next step would be to expand the universe of media professionals to include newspaper and magazine managers, as well as those who work in advertising and public relations.

However, this data provides a starting point for additional research on this topic. If further research confirms the findings in this pilot study, then information will be available for the Academy to respond in a way to better prepare journalism and mass communication students to work in media-related companies.

APPENDIX 4

**Journalism and mass communication ethics can best be learned in the classroom**

PERCEPTION n = 60 news directors, n = 158 students	News Directors	News Students
Strongly Agree	3.3%	1.2%
Agree	20.0%	9.1%
Neutral	23.3%	27.3%
Disagree	35.0%	43.6%
Strongly Disagree	18.3%	18.4%
MEAN	2.55	2.30*
SD	1.11	.92

APPENDIX 5

**Journalism and mass communication ethics can best be learned in extracurricular activities and internships**

PERCEPTION n = 60 news directors, n = 165 students	News Directors	News Students
Strongly Agree	5.0%	23.0%
Agree	35.0%	47.3%
Neutral	23.3%	23.0%
Disagree	25.0%	5.5%
Strongly Disagree	11.7%	1.2%
MEAN	2.97	3.85*
SD	1.13	.88

APPENDIX 6

**Journalism and mass communication ethics can best be learned on the job**

PERCEPTION n = 60 news directors, n = 164 students	News Directors	News Students
Strongly Agree	23.3%	50.6%
Agree	51.7%	36.6%
Neutral	16.7%	8.5%
Disagree	6.7%	3.7%
Strongly Disagree	1.7%	.6%
MEAN	3.88	4.33*
SD	.90	.83

APPENDIX 7

**Journalism instructors are familiar with ethical dilemmas in today's media companies**

PERCEPTION n = 60 news directors, n = 166 students	News Directors	News Students
Strongly Agree	0.0%	50.0%
Agree	22.0%	41.0%
Neutral	32.2%	8.4%
Disagree	39.0%	.6%
Strongly Disagree	6.8%	0.0%
MEAN	2.69	3.44*
SD	.90	.67

APPENDIX 8

**(Entry level employees are/I in my internship or first job would be) able to recognize potential ethical problems with a story or situation**

PERCEPTION n = 60 news directors, n = 160 students	News Directors	News Students
Strongly Agree	0.0%	31.3%
Agree	1.7%	55.6%
Neutral	20.0%	11.9%
Disagree	65.0%	.6%
Strongly Disagree	13.3%	.6%
MEAN	2.10	4.16*
SD	.63	.70

APPENDIX 9  
**Universities do a good job teaching  
 basic journalism skills, such as  
 reporting, writing, photography and/or design**

PERCEPTION n = 60 news directors, n = 30 students	News Directors	News Students
Strongly Agree	0.0%	24.7%
Agree	26.7%	36.8%
Neutral	26.7%	14.8%
Disagree	38.3%	3.7%
Strongly Disagree	8.3%	0.0%
MEAN	2.72	4.02*
SD	.96	.74

APPENDIX 10  
**Universities do a good job teaching  
 critical thinking skills, such as  
 ethics and problem-solving**

PERCEPTION n = 60 news directors, n = 163 students	News Directors	News Students
Strongly Agree	1.7%	12.0%
Agree	8.3%	56.9%
Neutral	28.5%	23.9%
Disagree	55.0%	7.4%
Strongly Disagree	6.7%	1.2%
MEAN	2.43	3.69*
SD	.81	.81

APPENDIX 11  
**(Entry level employees are/I) need work on  
 grammar, spelling and punctuation**

PERCEPTION n = 60 news directors, n = 165 students	News Directors	News Students
Strongly Agree	48.3%	13.9%
Agree	31.7%	20.0%
Neutral	10.0%	23.0%
Disagree	10.0%	24.7%
Strongly Disagree	0.0%	13.2%
MEAN	4.18	2.92*
SD	.98	1.26

FOR APPENDICES 1-11:

\* Means are significantly different (2-tailed p<.05). The mean is calculated from a five-point Likert scale. Respondents were asked to respond on a scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree).

APPENDIX 12  
**Schools have to balance between teaching  
 basic journalism skills and critical thinking skills. Where  
 would you strike a general balance between the two?**

PERCEPTION	MEAN	SD
NEWS DIRECTORS	5.58	1.57
STUDENTS	5.28	1.34

n = 60 news directors, n = 30 students

The mean is calculated from a nine-point Likert scale. Respondents were asked to respond on a scale ranging from 5 (more critical thinking) to 1 (more basic skills).

APPENDIX 13  
**Student responses to questions regarding exposure to  
 ethics instruction during internships/media-related jobs**

PERCEPTION	YES	NO
Did the company provide a written ethics policy?	33.8%	66.2%
Did the company talk about ethical behavior?	29.9%	70.1%
Did you observe someone make a "tough call"?	41.3%	58.7%

n = 168 students

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# Do as I say, ~~not~~ <sup>AND</sup> as I do

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**I**N THE NEWS BUSINESS TODAY, the issue of practicing ethics while reporting the news can be summed by the old adage: Do as I say, not as I do. For faculty members trying to teach students about the need for ethical behavior and ethical decision-making, there are fewer and fewer adherents to high ethical standards to point to in the industry as role models and say, "This is the kind of journalism you should aspire to." For example, when three of the most reputable newspapers in the United States engage in behavior that directly contradicts the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, what do we tell our students? Because if the best in the business claim that getting the "news" to the audience is more important than how they got that news, ethical standards don't stand a chance in the classroom.

Unfortunately, this example is not exaggeration. In May 2000 SPJ reported that the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* all compromised their ethics when they accepted a deal proposed by a publicist for United Airlines and U.S. Airways. The publicist offered the three papers details about a proposed \$5-billion merger on the condition that the papers' reporters did not call outside sources for comments. All three papers agreed, even when this agreement directly conflicted with the SPJ Code of Ethics that reads: "Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage." By agreeing to this deal, three of the leading papers in the industry agreed to deny their readers a full, balanced account of the story.

One *Washington Post* editor explained the paper's reasoning as it being more important for readers to have the story on the first day than not to have the story at all. Right. Of course. Translation: What if our competitors had it and we didn't?

In reality, bad decisions have a way of bringing even worse consequences. In this case, the deal fell through when an online news source broke the story without endangering its independence or objectivity.

When the choice is between ethics or an increase in readers or ratings, ethics almost invariably lose. A prime example is the 1992 ABC Food Lion case involving hidden cameras and microphones and undercover reporters – all of which are exciting concepts to journalism students. The legal merits of Food Lion's case against ABC's undercover reporting rested on breach of the duty of loyalty. This meant that the reporters were hired and trained as Food Lion employees and as such had a duty to be loyal to their employer, which the reporters acting as employees violated when they released their damaging story. Nevertheless, journalism pundits recognized this case as a prime opportunity to discuss or teach ethics, specifically the ethics of undercover reporting and the use of hidden technology.

The only problem with teaching that undercover reporting is wrong except in the most extreme of situations is that students see undercover reporting as a regular technique on multiple television newsmagazine shows. How can it be wrong, they ask, when ABC, NBC and CBS, supposed leaders in television journalism, do it all the time?

Scholars for the Project for Excellence in Journalism reported that PrimeTime Live, the show that aired the Food Lion story, had broadcast 80 original hidden camera stories between the show's debut in 1989 and the Food Lion trial, 50 of which were repeated during those same years. The airdates of these hidden camera shows were clustered around sweeps periods of September, October and November. What does that communicate to journalism students who have a clear understanding of the economics of the news industry? It practically shouts that ratings, and the advertising rates they generate, are more important than ethics.

So here we are again – the journalism

teachers desperately trying to instill in students the concept of ethics and ethical decision-making when the leaders in our industry are regularly displaying wanton disregard for those very same ethics. You can be certain the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* all have codes of ethics, but apparently adherence to those ethical standards is dependent on the possibility of getting scooped or, as in ABC's case, lower ratings.

Compounding the problem of teaching journalism students about the need for ethics is that the history of journalism is full of recognition and reward for those who engaged in unethical reporting behavior. Nellie Bly is the most obvious example. She's lauded in history texts as being a pioneer of "investigative" reporting. So what if she got herself falsely admitted to an insane asylum for the sole purpose of writing an expose about her experiences? To heck with the ethics violated here; she made a difference by reporting on the lives of these poor, neglected, abused women patients, so that makes it all right. But further research shows that improvements were already in the works by the city for asylum before Bly even entered the facility. Furthermore, Bly was scooped after only one story about her experiences by a reporter from the *New York Sun* who gathered his story information through

interviews with asylum staffers and reviews of medical records.

Who can fault students for wanting, like Bly, to make a difference for the better in their world? Professors can – when the desire to make a difference conflicts with accepted ethical behavior. Bly and Food Lion illustrate students' common question of whether the end justifies the means? The answer from professors should be: very rarely if ever at all.

For journalism professors, teaching ethics in the classroom is a daily struggle. Not only must we compete with our own sordid history regarding ethical lapses (I haven't even mentioned Hearst, Pulitzer and the period of Yellow Journalism), we also must compete with modern-day, highly respected news agencies flouting the whole concept of ethics in the face of financial gain.

How do we bring ethical standards back to the classroom and the industry? We do it by taking a firm stand, by telling students that financial gain, in all its permutations, is never an acceptable reason for violating ethical standards. Then, use the ethical lapses of the industry's leading news companies as examples of what not to do. Explain to students that the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* would have been better served to stand together and decry the publicist's unethical behavior. They could have published stories

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about the publicist's offer and explained to readers why the papers refused the offer based on their codes of ethics. The newspapers would still have been able to break news of the potential merger to their readers and their readers would have appreciated knowing that they can trust their news providers to engage in ethical behavior even when others don't.

As for PrimeTime Live, trial documents in the Food Lion/ABC case indicate that ABC probably could have obtained that story without going undercover and without the use of hidden technologies. Indeed, these same documents also indicate that story producers did not even try to get the story by ethical means, such as through interviews with current or former employees, but instead applied for work at Food Lion as soon as their story was approved. Journalism ethics teachers can also point out to students that, had

ABC truly been concerned with protecting the public from allegedly dangerous practices by Food Lion, as opposed to generating higher ratings during sweeps, then the reporters and producers would have followed the Radio Television News Directors Association's Code of Ethics and tried to break the story by traditional means, resorting to undercover work only if traditional methods failed. But they didn't, and by not doing so they hurt Food Lion, they hurt their own credibility, and they did serious damage to the credibility of journalists everywhere.

Instead of relying solely on positive role models in our class sessions on journalism ethics, journalism instructors would perhaps be better served to use these examples of tarnished industry leaders to build respect in students for something other than money. This may seem a naive position at first, but the logic is solid.

Good journalism brings readers, listeners and viewers, and good journalism can be accomplished without ethical lapses. We need not trade integrity for ratings or readers; we can have both. What we do need is to explain to students that Nellie Bly and the age of Yellow Journalism was a dark time in our industry's history, when ethics fell to financial gain – that as journalists we need to be motivated by something other than higher ratings or fear of being scooped, because if we aren't, then we at least need to stop giving lip service to codes of ethics.

Ideally, by instilling a high regard for professional ethics and ethical decision-making, we are training a new generation of journalists who will be able to say to those with questionable ethical standards: Do as I say and as I do.

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# CATCH-22

## Small and Diminishing Opportunity Confounds Big and Growing Need

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**B**IG AND GROWING NEED . . . SMALL AND DIMINISHING OPPORTUNITY . . . That's the Catch-22 of teaching ethics in public relations. The need is big because of the profession's tarnished reputation, and it is growing because of the fuzzy rules that govern both new media and new global markets. The opportunity for teaching ethics is small because of the wide range of skills that already crowd the curriculum, and the opportunity is diminishing because of the very factors that are growing the need in the first place. Public relations educators thus face a dilemma about dilemmas – when, where and how to train their students to responsibly manage the ethical dilemmas they will certainly face in the profession. The problem is that we have to cover a wide range of often conflicting values, further complicated by limited resources and by questions about the effectiveness of various approaches. Furthermore, even if we conquer today's challenges, even if we devise an ideal approach to teaching ethics for the profession as it currently exists, we can only guess at some of the ethical debates that will be posed by tomorrow's technology and by emerging markets.

In an ideal world, we would train aspiring public relations practitioners in all of the skills they may need. . . .

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For their contributions on teaching ethics in public relations, thanks go to  
 SHANNON BOWEN, *University of Houston*;  
 ALAN FREITAG, *University of North Carolina-Charlotte*;  
 BARBARA DeSANTO, *Oklahoma State University*; and  
 LISA FALL, *University of Tennessee*.

They would master the techniques of writing speeches, news releases, feature articles and public service announcements. They would be adroit writers and articulate speakers. They would know how to effectively manage media relations and human relations. They would have command of advertising media buy-

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*We would provide students  
with comprehensive breadth and depth of skills  
so they would be equipped to manage  
all types of relationships with all types of publics . . .  
and we would polish each skill  
with a keen sense of responsibility for consequences  
on the disadvantaged and the disenfranchised. . . .  
all within the parameters of ACEJMC guidelines,  
including a limitation on credit hours within the major  
to ensure a broad liberal arts education.*

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ing, strategy planning and creative development. We would train them to be resourceful with all types of communications technology. They would be able to deftly negotiate database searches and audio/video equipment. They would be proficient desktop publishers and webmasters. They would know more about newspapers than reporters know, and they would understand the conflicting values that confront journalists. They would know more about television and radio than broadcasters know, and they would understand the conflicting values that challenge newscasters. They would have well-honed skills in research methodology and data analysis. They would be well-versed in the research of public opinion, buyer behavior, demographics, psychographics, content analysis, motivation psychology, and processes and effects of mediated communication. We would provide them with comprehensive breadth and depth of skills so they would be equipped to manage all types of relationships with all types of publics. And we would polish each skill with a keen sense of responsibility for consequences on target publics, the disadvantaged and the disenfranchised.

Of course, we would accomplish all of this within the parameters of an accredited academic program that complies with all of the ACEJMC guidelines, including a limitation on credit hours within the major to ensure a broad liberal arts education.

## **BIG NEED**

### **Bad Reputation • Affiliated Fields**

Because of the profession's sullied reputation, and because of its affiliation with a wide range of other fields, there is a big need for us to do a better job teaching ethics in public relations.

Shyster tactics of P.T. Barnum, deceptive political propaganda and the dirty tricks of Nixon's Watergate era advisers left the profession with a legacy of criticism increasingly difficult to retire due to the recent ridiculous political maneuverings so fresh on the minds of both journalists and audiences. Euphemisms used to disguise negative terminology and facts twisted beyond credibility have spun public relations into "spin." Lisa Fall (2001) devotes much of her ethics course at the University of Tennessee to a discussion of how spin "represents unethical behavior" and "how it keeps being used in tandem with 'public relations' by the media."

In order to distance the profession from spin and to elevate credibility, we must train new practitioners to seek higher moral ground. Sarah Zupko (1994) posits that, not only are ethics "good for business," they help practitioners better position themselves in business. "Public relations professionals basing their decision-making and recommendations to management on ethical principles and social responsibility are more likely to have a greater role in management decisions and activities," Zupko explains. So, an elevated level of responsible behavior reaps more than benefits for the client. It also correlates with increased opportunities for practitioners to participate in the management function, and it provides the profession's best means of escaping its historic legacy of criticism.

Of course, students may understandably view a high moral tone as an impractical academic notion if their role models in the profession seem to revel in what Alan Freitag (2001), University of North Carolina-Charlotte, terms "the giddy ambience of wealth unbound." He applauds the progress of recent decades in raising the level of the practice, but he fears that the prosperity of the 1990s may have contributed to a plateau in that progress in the commercial sector. As a case in point of the "dominance of profit over relationships," Freitag points to the birth of *PR Week*. He says that each issue of the publication "seems with increasing stridency to hawk the value of slickness, speed and personal advancement, generally without regard for principle." The front page of the Feb. 12, 2001, issue promises a feature on "PR's hottest talent." On pp. 14-15, headlined "A Hotbed for Hotties," the publication features "the most intriguing single people in PR." Biographical sketches that accompany the photographs of the "PR hotties" provide zodiac signs, favorite drinks and wildest experiences. In an editorial on p. 8 of the same issue, the publication declares, "It's not *PR Week's* job to enhance the respectability of the industry." Freitag laments that "scintillating photos of pecs and cleavage do little for our profession." He urges cultivation of "our role as conscience of the organization, encouraging and facilitating changes in corporate behavior when it is in the best interest of all concerned."

The field's need for better teaching of ethics is also big because of its affiliation with so many other professional areas. In addition to the PRSA Code of Ethics and the moral minefields of our profession, we must be familiar with the codes and values of several other professions. We need to know the code and values of our companion field of advertising. If we are to effectively generate publicity, we must serve the needs of both print and broadcast gatekeepers. So we also need a working knowledge of the values of news journalists, as well as the codes of SPJ and RTNDA. Beyond all this are the guidelines that govern our clients in business, politics, sports, entertainment, etc.

## GROWING NEED

### New Media • Global Marketplace

The big need to do a better job teaching ethics in public relations is growing with the development of new media and emerging markets.

Steve Smethers (1998), Oklahoma State University, notes that advertising and public relations professionals "have enthusiastically eyed...new marketing and promotional possibilities" via the internet. However, with the opportunities of cyberspace come new jeopardies. User anonymity means anybody can widely distribute any message, thereby compromising credibility and posing limitless threats to individual and corporate reputations. Add to the anonymity issue the ease with which sensitive information can be accessed and we can count our blessings that Nixon's dirty tricks brigade predated the internet. "Complexities involved in creating meaningful regulation," Smethers notes, "have bred complex new twists to old legal and ethical problems, and those complications seem to defy the parameters of accountability that have traditionally governed print and broadcasting." Smethers also notes that interactive media have further blurred the distinctions between disciplines. The World Wide Web is part print, part electronic, providing a synergistic companion to a potpourri of other media and, of course, increasing the importance of cross-discipline ethics.

New media also connect the global marketplace. However, a wired world does not one paradigm make. Larry Pintak (1995), managing partner of TriComm Strategic Communications in Jakarta, Indonesia, cautions that the realities of developing markets can push previously conceived ethical imperatives out the window. He says that reporters in Indonesia, China, Russia and other countries expect transportation money at news conferences. "The envelope is slipped right into the media kit," Pintak explains, and the going rate is about \$25 per reporter. A story on government-run television in Indonesia costs around \$1,000. "They'll even give you a receipt," Pintak says. The good news is that the PR-news relationship is not adversarial. Reporters wel-

come story pitches and are grateful when offered an interview.

Because many corporations in the global marketplace have encountered graft and corruption issues in emerging markets, Dean Kruckeberg (1993), University of Northern Iowa, believes that "increased globalized trade has hastened the need for an international code of ethics for communicators." So rules that remain MIA (missing in the already active global marketplace) confound the growing need to do a better job teaching ethics in public relations.

## SMALL OPPORTUNITY

### Crowded Curriculum • Insufficient Resources

The big and growing need to do a better job teaching ethics in public relations is countered by a small and diminishing opportunity to do so.

Most mass communication programs deal with ethics, but rarely does the topic receive prime treatment. Smethers' survey indicated that ethics is "not a staple of classes in advertising and public relations." The topic is more often addressed in general mass communication courses. Paul McNerny (1997-98) and M.L. Stein (1998) found that even then it is more often an abbreviated unit in an introductory course or a class in media law.

Of the programs surveyed by Cliff Christians (1996), University of Illinois, 39 percent offer or plan to offer free-standing ethics courses. Of course, that means 61 percent have no plans to do so. And less than a quarter of the free-standing courses that are offered or planned will be required.

Although Christians notes that ethics "has been taken back from its isolation in the philosophy department," many communication programs remain thwarted from duplicating the ethics coursework still housed in philosophy.

Both Christians and McNerny found that the reason most often given for the lack of ethics courses is that ethical issues are

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discussed as they arise in all courses. Crowded curriculum and insufficient budgets each received nods from just over 27 percent of the respondents in Christians' survey. Smethers found the reasons given for the lack of ethics courses to most often be faculty-related. Many programs lack enough personnel to teach

ethics courses or, in the case of new media, faculty members do not have sufficient expertise to competently teach the material.

Christians points to racial and gender imbalances among those who do teach communications ethics; 73 percent are male and 92 percent are European American. And Stein found a remarkable dearth of interest in public relations ethics research. Although demographic research and message research, as well as public opinion polling, are common in the profession, less than 10 percent of the scholars surveyed by Stein indicated involvement in studies of public relations ethics.

## **DIMINISHING OPPORTUNITY**

### **Growing Demands • Increased Competition**

Recently revised ACEJMC accreditation guidelines allow more mass communication coursework than in the past, but a public relations option within a communication department is still limited to about six courses. Providing the necessary skills training is difficult when, assuming at least a three-hour internship, a public relations option might be limited to four or five courses. New media and the global marketplace add to both the skills menu and the list of ethics issues.

Barbara DeSanto, who partners educators and students from universities in the Netherlands, Sweden, United Kingdom

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*Students who are excited about ethics are more likely to develop responsible decision-making processes. And those who recognize the personal advantages to be reaped by high ethical standards will really get excited.*

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and the U.S., says that, “to understand and apply ethics in international communication work requires even more study in culture and history.” The result is more competition for less space in the curriculum.

However, despite diminishing opportunity in the curriculum, the need to do a better job teaching ethics in public relations is still big and growing. Given the big need/small opportunity dissonance, we must make the most of available opportunities.

## **BEST APPROACHES**

### **Practical Application • Expanded Paradigm**

Above all, we must teach process rather than answers. New practitioners trained to make decisions concerning new dilemmas, not just draw from a grabbag of decisions for dilemmas

previously encountered, will be empowered to negotiate the as yet unknown conflicting choices of new media.

The process of making decisions is an activity, not a passive sponging of information. Yet Christians found that the leading approach to ethics courses is still lecture. This may be why he found mixed student reviews of ethics courses. Although the students surveyed found the courses interesting, Christians says they were not satisfied. “Most students concluded that ethics was largely a matter of opinion,” Christians concludes, because the courses “did not resolve enough issues or give them explicit help.” The survey indicated that nearly 98 percent of ethics courses employ a case studies approach; 84 percent, written assignments; 77 percent, small group discussion; 71 percent, research papers; 57 percent, lectures by outside experts; 57 percent, panels of opposing views; 40 percent, role playing; 11 percent, simulation games; 9 percent, novels or plays.

McInerney asserts that ethics theory be grounded in the process of public relations. “This will help link ethics to the practice for the professional.” One approach he suggests ties ethics to research. “Research, a critical element in any public relations effort, is discussed in most textbooks from a technical viewpoint,” McInerney explains. “However, one of the main problems facing business and public relations today is the ‘sliding in ethics’ involving research that is conducted solely to pitch a product, position or opinion.” He suggests making students responsible for finding skewed studies or cases in which ethical considerations damaged the profession’s reputation, “discussing how different corporate cultures within actual companies would dictate handling crisis situations or routine matters, and identifying social areas where ethical considerations will naturally conflict.” McInerney concludes that teaching students about the implications of an improperly conducted or intentionally manipulated study “is just as important as stressing the ramifications for success of a public relations effort.”

Additional approaches embrace public relations’ ties to other disciplines. “Interdisciplinary assignments with courses in philosophy or other disciplines could prove most interesting,” McInerney suggests. “Since most public relations majors also study an academic minor from another discipline, such cross studies and assignments should be a natural undertaking for the student.”

Shannon Bowen, University of Houston, uses a business ethics textbook when teaching public relations ethics. “They provide many of the same cases that are so famous in public relations,” Bowen explains, “but they include a whole-company perspective, rather than just the communication perspective.” This approach helps students recognize *all* of the considerations involved in an ethical decision.

Such expansions of the paradigm are critical because reputation repair is needed outside the profession, not internally. For several years, I offered a summer Media Ethics Forum at a junior college. Students referred to it as “Thursday Night at the Movies.” Initially students from a wide range of academic disciplines enrolled in what they thought sounded like an easy course. Among the eight movies we examined each summer were “All the President’s Men,” with emphasis on the ethics of investigative reporting; “Broadcast News,” on the ethics of style over substance and re-enactment of news events; and “Word of Honor,” on the ethics of divulging sources. This course covered all of mass media with the emphasis on news, but plenty of films about other fields of communication are available. Each week’s session began with a debate about the consequences of the alternatives that could have been chosen by the characters in the previous film, followed by a briefing on considerations for the movie of that evening. Because more than half of the students came from majors outside communication, different values clashed in lively discussion. “Other people” held views quite at variance with those of the mass communication students, who therefore learned much about how audiences perceive media. A fringe benefit was greater appreciation among students outside mass communication for the role of a free press and the dilemmas faced by advocacy journalists. Soon students from three universities were carpooling to the junior college each summer. They got excited about ethics.

That may be the key. Regardless of the amount of time devoted to the teaching of ethics, students who are excited about ethics are more likely to develop responsible decision-making processes. And those who recognize the personal advantages to be reaped by high ethical standards will really get excited.

“For ethical practice to become a permanent part of consciousness it must become equated with successful public relations,” McInerney concludes. “For that to happen, the ethical emphasis in public relations must begin with public relations

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*A new practitioner who develops a personal process of responsible decision-making, who is excited about having a personal stake in developing responsibility in the profession, is more likely to be equipped to confront the new dilemmas posed by emerging markets and changing technology.*

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education in colleges and universities.” Educators must recognize that the need is big and growing. Since the opportunity is small and diminishing, educators must implement approaches that will excite students about the benefits of rising to the big and growing challenges. Students who seek the career benefits that accompany responsible decision-making are the most likely to develop a personal process, regardless of the amount of time spent studying ethics in required courses. And a new practitioner who develops a personal process of responsible decision-making, who is excited about having a personal stake in developing responsibility in the profession, is more likely to be equipped to confront the new dilemmas posed by emerging markets and changing technology.

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# Personal Choices Between Conflicting Values

(BEGINNING IN ABOUT THIRD GRADE)

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**S**IX YEARS AGO, the faculty at the Reynolds School of Journalism, University of Nevada-Reno, debated the need to teach ethics more thoroughly and more rigorously than they had been in their regular course instruction. Their discussion was occasioned by a belief that many ethical mistakes were made by well-meaning journalists, advertising and public relations professionals who simply had not stopped to think about what they were doing. At the time, the use of hidden cameras at Food Lion provided a fresh example, but each faculty member could think of some incident that made us wonder if our assertion, “I cover ethics in every course I teach,” was doing the job of preparing students for the ethical dilemmas they were sure to face.

As a result of these discussions, and with the encouragement of several alumni, the school decided to launch a full-semester ethics course that would cover ethical systems and issues in print, broadcast and online journalism, and advertising and public relations.

A later question that emerged after the course was developed was whether to teach ethics at graduate and senior level or earlier at sophomore level. Some faculty argued that sophomores were too young to apply the philosophical underpinnings from the work of Kant, Mill, Bok and Aristotle that we had included in the syllabus. Some faculty felt students needed to know the mechanics of writing stories and releases and making ads before they could apply the ethical principles involved. The counter-argument went: Why wait until they are seniors? Students need to understand ethics before they go on to advanced reporting or copywriting in their junior and senior classes.

The faculty ultimately decided upon the sophomore level course and agreed that instructors from print, broadcast, online, advertising and public relations would all teach classes in the course. They also decided the course should be mandatory. Media Ethics is now part of the journalism core at the Reynolds School.

As head of the advertising sequence, this decision gave me two opportunities to teach ethics to advertising students. One is the full-semester Media Ethics class I now teach to all journalism students before they start advertising classes. The second opportunity occurs during the advertising classes, the skills courses in media planning, account management, copywriting and design, and account planning.

My primary goal in teaching ethics is to get students to move past gut reaction and purely emotional response and employ a system of rational decision-making. I emphasize that ethics is about critical thinking, about examining the facts, about considering values, principles and consequences. I note that, especially in a fast-paced business like advertising, there is often very little time to make any decision, especially an ethical decision, so it is essential students have well-developed personal systems for making decisions fast and under pressure. I emphasize having a personal system for doing ethics rather than relying on professional codes. While we examine the codes of the American Association of Advertising Agencies and other groups, I urge students to develop their own ethical systems because they may find themselves having to make decisions under the pressure of deadlines without any chance to refer to codes and handbooks.

In addition, I find professional codes too easy to overlook. My own experience in the advertising business suggests that a written industry code is likelier to be tucked into an employee handbook or posted in the breakroom than readily available on a commercial shoot or at a meeting in the client's office. I believe it essential students know how to

think ethically all the time no matter where they find themselves.

I have not asked, but I wonder if anyone was consulting or even thinking about the AAAA Creative Code on the set of the 1990 Volvo commercial?

#### EXAMPLES OF WHAT WE DISCUSS

*Target audiences.* During my two decades at Ogilvy & Mather, we were taught the most important decision we make in advertising is defining the target audience. Strategy, execution, everything important flows from that decision.

My students and I spend considerable time examining the effect of ads on the targets for whom they are intended. We also talk about the effects of some ads on targets not intended. By focusing on the primary target we have some interesting discussions about ads like the Calvin Klein underwear poster of a few years ago, the infamous Tequila ad about what a dog licks, the Dewar's headline about a screaming orgasm, the Reebok commercial featuring bungee jumping. We consider the difference between ads that are unethical and ads that are vulgar.

With targets in mind, we look at political advertising, historical ads like the "daisy" commercial for Lyndon Johnson produced by Doyle, Dane, Bernbach, and the "revolving door" spot run by Bush supporters against Dukakis. We look further at recent ads run in our own state of Nevada for local and state politicians and issues.

*Stealing ideas and propping photos.* In my copywriting class, we discuss the ethics of stealing another person's or agency's creative campaign idea, and we discuss in depth the ways to photograph, prop or describe a product. Every semester, I bring in two bowls, a can of Campbell's vegetable soup and a bag of clear glass marbles. I usually heat up the soup and then ask students to help prepare the bowl for photography. As I do this, I tell them my first job in advertising out of college was as a copy trainee on the Campbell's account at BBDO, and I remember the campaign when we first put marbles in the soup. This gives all my students a chance to debate the issues in the case that put the FTC and Campbell's into battle.

*Ethics of research and account management.* In my Account Management classes, we discuss the ethical problems that can come up when dealing with difficult clients, even dishonest clients and supervisors. In the Account Planning classes, we deal with the ethical implication of the games and devices planners use to encourage consumers to reveal what they truly feel about a product or service. We ask ourselves what are or should be the ethical guidelines for interviewing consumers, especially if the consumers are children.

*My own experiences.* I tell stories about ethical dilemmas I faced writing ads at Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn, McCann-Marschalk and Ogilvy & Mather in New York. I draw upon decisions I was required to make when I was head of the Los Angeles office of

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Ogilvy & Mather. Two of our major clients, General Foods Cereals and Mattel, advertised to children.

But for all the discussions and stories and examples, the primary objective of my teaching is to sensitize the student to the need to develop his or her own system for making ethical decisions – and to ask questions constantly, if sometimes quietly.

### **THE KINDS OF QUESTIONS I HOPE STUDENTS WILL ASK WHEN THEY GO INTO THE ADVERTISING BUSINESS**

- Does the advertising objective serve the best interests of the client without violating fair practices in business or fair campaign practices?
- Have we considered the true impact – have we tested the true impact – of our creative message on the target? What about the effect of our advertising on people outside the target?
- When we design or commission research, are we seeking truthful answers or are we just using research to ratify cherished biases – the client’s or our own?
- Does the creative work offend or humiliate racial or religious groups? Does it make fun of people for who they are or what characteristics they were born with?

And ultimately . . .

- Do we accept responsibility for the relationships we establish with the consumers we seek to persuade?

In my view, if advertising practitioners each employed a system for ethical decision-making that required them to think about all their obligations – to self, to employer, to clients, to the advertising profession and to society – we would do better as a profession. At least we would do better at anticipating the consequences of our decisions.

Bill Bernbach believed the most powerful ingredient in advertising is the truth. And almost any discussion of ethics in advertising begins with a consideration of truth in advertising as the most important ethical issue. Truth in advertising is what makes it credible and effective. When advertising is found to be untruthful, when claims are exaggerated or demonstrations rigged, it increases public mistrust of all advertising. Truthfulness – or the lack of it – is the issue most often raised in debates about advertising ethics.

In his 1994 study of advertising decision-making, Joel Davis of San Diego State concluded that the majority of advertising professionals are primarily influenced by legal rather than ethical considerations when evaluating advertising. And, while Davis concedes that checking legal considerations is a

reasonable first step, he is troubled that, too often, legal considerations are not tempered by ethical considerations. Too many professionals are inclined to assume that, if an ad is legal, it is acceptable. Davis suggests that, if advertising professionals are guided only by the literal letter of the law, the elimination of deceptive advertising seems a remote ideal.

For some advertising practitioners, ethics is strictly a matter of law or, more precisely, what the law will allow an advertiser to say or show about a product or service. For them, what the law allows is therefore truthful enough. The limitation of this view is that the laws on advertising were written in response to specific egregious practices.

### **“DOING ETHICS”**

One of the texts we use in our Media Ethics course is *Media Ethics: Issues and Cases* by Philip Patterson and Lee Wilkins. They assert that ethical thinking begins when elements in a moral system are in conflict, and that ethics is an active, on-going process. Others who teach ethics, like Deni Elliot at Montana, refer to “doing ethics” as a way to emphasize that ethics is a process rather than a set of written guidelines or encoded prohibitions. Ethics is a process of moral reasoning and of making rational choices between what is morally justifiable and what is not.

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At least we would do better  
at anticipating the consequences of our decisions.

Waiting to teach ethics until people enter a profession  
may be waiting too long.

Too few agencies and companies have the time or zeal  
to offer much more than a short workshop.

Ethics deserves the critical analysis and intellectual rigor  
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In fact, it deserves more.

In an ideal world, we would probably start teaching ethics formally  
in third grade.

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Was the decision to put marbles in a bowl of Campbell's vegetable soup more justifiable than failing to get the most appetizing photograph of the product? Did Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn decision-makers owe more to their client than to the public viewing the finished ad? Who was deceived by the true nature of the soup? Who benefited from the propping of the soup? Who was harmed?

These are the kinds of questions that characterize the discussion in my classes. I agree with Patterson and Wilkins that *ethics is not so much about right versus wrong as it is about conflicting values and choices*.

The ethical dilemmas facing an advertising agency professional may require him or her to make a rational choice between serving the legitimate interests of the clients and the legitimate interests of the agency. Or it may require the professional to balance the

legitimate appeal to a target audience with the agency's obligations to the public at large. And the dilemmas facing the decision-makers at agencies and client companies are compounded by the press of deadlines, the heat of competition, and the complexities of technology.

Yet time, deadlines and competitive pressure are insufficient excuses when the ad or commercial is denounced as untruthful or unethical.

"Doing ethics" is a way for us to balance competing rights and even help choose between unavoidable wrongs. My hope is to help arm students who go forth into advertising with the intellect and the sensitivity to know what they are doing, while they are doing it.

Since we began teaching ethics to undergraduates, we have been confirmed in our belief that university undergraduates have

both the desire and the capacity to master the subject. Those of us who teach the full-semester course have received calls and e-mails from former students who say they found their examination of ethics truly helpful in their professional work. We are about to launch a questionnaire which may help us further identify the value of our ethics course in relation to other courses we teach.

In my own view, waiting to teach ethics until people enter a profession may be waiting too long. Too few agencies and companies have the time or zeal to offer much more than a short workshop. Ethics deserves the critical analysis and the intellectual rigor we can offer in a 15-week university course. In fact, it deserves more. In an ideal world, we would probably start teaching ethics formally in third grade.

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# More Than Optional Rules for Right Behavior

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“**J**OURNALISM IS IN A STATE OF DISORIENTATION,” claim Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel in their book, *Warp Speed*, “brought on by rapid technological change, declining market share, and growing pressure to operate with economic efficiency.” Their book sheds light on what they call the “mixed media culture” that has led, in their view, to a demise of journalistic standards, loss of public trust and reinforces the need for, and value of teaching journalistic ethics in other courses.

I teach two courses, a core-curriculum course, Journalism and Democracy, and an upper-class course, Public Relations and Society. Both courses have an ethics component that comes into play midway of the 15-week semester.

The goal of the Journalism and Democracy course is to give first-year students an opportunity to evaluate the role of journalism and news in our democracy, the effects of the news media in our society and on the individual, the importance of an informed electorate in a free society, and the responsibility of citizens to know, think and speak out about public issues.

The Public Relations and Society course is open to sophomores, juniors and seniors in all majors. The course examines the impact of public relations in society with a major emphasis on media, community, government, employee relations and serving as an organization’s conscience.

Most of the students in my Journalism and Democracy classes are first-year students with an average ACT composite standard score of 23. Some of them are journalism majors. Others are business administration, English, history, foreign language, psychology majors and undecided.

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Kovach, B., and T. Rosentiel. *Warp Speed*. New York: The Century Foundation Press, pp. 1-2.

Two-thirds of the students in my Public Relations and Society course are speech communications majors. The rest of the students are business administration, foreign language, political science, marketing and journalism majors.

By the time we reach the segment of the course that addresses the question of ethics, we have covered the history and the growth and development of journalism, newspapers, magazines, radio, television and the evolving use of the Internet by news media. In addition, throughout the semester I require my students to read newspapers, regularly view television news, maintain news journals that critique the news they read and see, and respond to weekly news quizzes.

Over the five years that I have been teaching these two courses I have noticed a growing number of students who have no idea what ethics is and know even less about the distinctions between ethics and the law and the importance and value of both. They also grumble incessantly about being required to follow the news reports. Most of them harbor almost no respect for journalists, who they view as unethical and troublemakers.

For the most part, many of my students view ethics as mere rules for right behavior that they can follow or ignore. Ethical codes, they conclude, are not laws. I find it helpful to bring to their attentions that there are penalties for infringing on the university's Code of Conduct, which is, in fact, a code of ethics. That revelation causes my students to pause and give more serious thought to our discussion about journalistic and mass media ethics. It also provides a natural segue into a discussion of prescriptive ethics codes.

I point out to my students that, although these codes prescribe how journalists and public relations practitioners should go about their work, they do not provide answers for all of the moral choices with which practitioners must grapple. Sometimes the ethics of a situation conflict with some practitioners' moral responsibilities.

On the other hand, I explain to my students, moral priorities such as dignity and privacy sometimes seem less important than other priorities. The code of the Society of Professional Journalists, for example, calls for reporters to show respect for the dignity, privacy, rights and well-being of people "at all times." Yet during the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal public interest often overrode the privacy of Monica's mother and others who had no direct relationship to that situation.

As we explore the issues related to ethics and mass media, my students begin to sense that those "rules for right behavior" have value. They also realize that they do not provide answers for the wide variety of ethical situations that occur over time. This revelation becomes even clearer during our discussion of duty – to self, audience, employer, profession and society.

Which leads us into a discussion and exploration of the major ethics principles that have evolved over the past 2,400 years – Aristotle's Golden Mean, the Judeo-Christian principle of "do unto others," Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperatives, John Stuart Mill's utilitarian ethics, John Dewey's pragmatic ethics, John Rawls' egalitarian ethics and the Hutchins Commission's social responsibility ethics.

Most of the students are familiar with the Judeo-Christian principle of "do unto others." They have heard of Aristotle, but have no idea which his philosophic view is. Few, if any, of my students know about Kant, Mill, Dewey, Rawls and the Hutchins Commission. So we spend some time discussing the various philosophic views of these men.

To bring order and sense to these principles, I break my Journalism and Democracy class into seven small groups representing the major ethical principles. I assign each group the same ethical issue and I ask the students to apply their assigned principle to the issue. In response, the classroom becomes a buzz of spirited discussion. When each group presents their conclusion, the students can better understand how they can apply the various moral principles to real life issues. They also, hopefully, can gain a sense of how difficult applying moral principles to real life issues is.

It is at this point that my students, most of whom have seldom thought deeply about moral issues, are faced with the reality that ethics and law are different. "How can that be?" is the usual response. Examples of civil disobedience are usually help-

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ful. I also point out to my students that the law allows mass media practitioners to do many things that they would not normally do.

I also discuss the issues of plagiarism, misrepresentation, accepted practices, gifts, junkets and meals, and other mass media practices that are inconsistent with many moral principles.

In my Public Relations and Society classes, we look briefly at the classical ethical principles that provide guidance for society overall. I then turn to the public relations department that, in many organizations, serves as the institution's internal conscience. The emphasis here is the role of ethics in business, the development of corporate codes of conduct, social responsibil-

ity guidelines, ethics in government, and ethics in public relations and journalism.

I have also found that sharing my experiences in meeting the challenges of ethics in government when I served as press secretary to the former mayor of Washington, D.C., Marion Barry, to be especially helpful to my students because I served before the mayor was arrested, tried for drug possession and sent to prison for six months in 1990.

Ultimately, my goal is to impress upon my students that codes of ethics are guides to consider when faced with ethical questions, but there are as many answered questions as there are unanswered ones. They, on the other hand, must be prepared to respond appropriately to ethical challenges they may face in the future.

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# Letting Students Live the Challenge of Practicing Ethical Journalism

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**I**N A TELEVISION NEWSROOM, it's minutes before the evening newscast and the phone rings. An anonymous caller says police have arrested a local high school football coach on charges of sexual misconduct. According to the caller, the award-winning coach turned himself in to police after an alleged victim told authorities about her relationship with the coach. The caller says he is a loyal viewer and wants *you* to have the story *first*. You telephone the local police department to find that the spokesperson is out of the office. You try to confirm the tip with the officer on the phone, but you can't verify anything. What do you do with the information?

Whether the situation surrounds the use of unconfirmed reports, anonymous sources, graphic video, reports about juveniles or intrusions into private lives, broadcast journalists face ethical dilemmas almost daily.

Since news stories are broadcast on television and radio, and printed in newspapers and newsmagazines, "how well journalists have met their responsibilities is a judgment call open to scrutiny with the production of every story...No other professional behavior is as open to scrutiny by those working in the profession, those who are used by the profession, and those who consume the final products."<sup>1</sup>

"The primary news critics – the subjects and consumers of the resulting news story – do not hesitate to voice judgments about the rights and wrongs of journalistic action. Thus, the practice of journalism ethics begins."<sup>2</sup>

While some scholars define ethics as the study of morality, others claim *professional* ethics are much more than mere ordinary morality or common sense.<sup>3</sup>

“Like other special standards, ethics cannot be learned in most families, religious institutions or primary or secondary schools. Generally ethics must be taught as part of a formal professional education or learned in some less formal way (for example, by copying what others do in a workplace).”<sup>4</sup>

Journalism ethics is a branch of professional ethics. “In particular it is that part of professional ethics that addresses problems concerning behavior of reporters, editors, photographers, videographers, producers and any other professional involved in the production and distribution of news.”<sup>5</sup>

“At the roots of this normative, philosophical study is the understanding that the profession fulfills a necessary function in society. Citizens need to receive and share particular kinds of information to function effectively in their communities and news organizations have pledged to provide that information.”<sup>6</sup>

But data suggest journalists have a lot of work ahead of them to show the public that they’re fulfilling that pledge responsibly.

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*Journalists must be critical thinkers,  
and ethical thinking must be at the core  
of the journalistic process.*

*Therefore, the student must be immersed in the process  
to even understand the ethical challenges  
that he or she will eventually confront in the profession.*

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According to a 1995 poll conducted by the *Times Mirror* for the People and the Press (renamed the Pew Center), “Two-thirds of the public believe reporters are no more ethical than the politicians they report on...Reporters are held in the same low regard as undertakers and insurance salesmen and only slightly higher than politicians.”<sup>7</sup>

Apparently, professional journalists as well as journalism educators are taking note. During the past decade, professional groups, such as the Society of Professional Journalists, Committee of Concerned Journalists and American Society of Newspaper Editors, spent considerable effort fostering ethics in the field.<sup>8</sup> Think-tanks like the Poynter Institute and the American Press Institute offer workshops and short courses in ethics for working reporters and editors; and the Society of Professional Journalists distributes its Code of Ethics and endorses an online ethics discussion group. “Yet, media muck-ups, abuses of journalistic privilege and situations of questionable ethical conduct in news gathering and reporting continue.”<sup>9</sup>

Regarding journalism education in the past two decades, the number of colleges and universities teaching ethics in

journalism and mass communications programs more than doubled. From 1984 to 1993, the number of colleges and universities offering courses devoted solely to journalism or communications ethics increased by 56 percent. Furthermore, the number of schools incorporating ethics modules in existing classes increased by 825 percent during the same period. The most recent figures show 183 colleges and universities had media ethics courses, while 222 incorporated ethics instruction in a variety of classes.<sup>10</sup>

While courses in journalism ethics have multiplied, some argue that professional schools are still not doing enough to teach professional ethics.<sup>11</sup> One scholar states, “The primary value of introducing ethical themes into non-ethics courses is to awaken students to the broader personal, social and institutional dimensions of particular fields and disciplines. Such an introduction can serve as a valuable preparation for more systematic modes of ethical thinking.”<sup>12</sup>

Journalists must be critical thinkers, and ethical thinking must be at the core of the journalistic process. Therefore, the student must be immersed in the process to even understand the ethical challenges that he or she will eventually confront in the profession.

At the University of South Carolina’s College of Journalism and Mass Communications, electronic and print students must enroll in the college’s capstone experience or the Senior Semester program. Journalism ethics is at the core of these courses.

In Senior Semester, students earn 12 hours of college credit while working five days a week in their respective newsrooms. Print journalism students produce weekly and online newspapers. Students select topics, write and edit stories, engage in computer-assisted reporting, and produce graphics and headlines for their publications.

The electronic capstone is equally demanding, requiring students to spend more than 40 hours weekly reporting, writing, editing and producing a daily 30-minute newscast. Students work as reporters, videographers producers and anchors. Additionally, each student must spend one day a week at the South Carolina Educational Radio Network (SCERN) gathering and reporting the news for a statewide audience.

Students are advised to no longer consider themselves “students,” but professionals. The live television newscast airs on university and city of Columbia’s cable systems. SCERN airs students’ work statewide. The radio network also has an innovative Internet component for students to disseminate their work.

The real learning process may actually come once the broadcast is over and the newspaper is in print. USC journalism faculty in the Senior Semester program spend hours critiquing

the final products. Students and faculty begin a dialogue to analyze the day's work, which is often grounded in ethical decision-making. How could we better report the story? Was the story fair? Have we told the truth?

The associate dean for undergraduate studies at the college, Dr. Kent Sidel, said, "The semester allows students to be involved in real life decision-making on a daily basis. This is about as close to the 'real world' as we can make it."<sup>13</sup>

In the electronic newsroom, students hold an early morning story meeting and then begin the task of gathering and disseminating the news in a commercial type format. "This is basically the students' first jobs," said Professor Rick Peterson. "It's a great place for them to be exposed to ethical thinking and decision-making."<sup>14</sup>

Integrating ethics in a capstone experience lends itself to the same decisions that must be made in commercial newsrooms.

"There's got to be reinforcement. There's got to be overlay. There's got to be repetition," said William Babcock, a professor of media ethics at the University of Minnesota and former chair of AEJMC's Media Ethics Division.<sup>15</sup> The ideal, he says, for any journalism program is to have at least one course devoted to ethics and to include ethics instruction in other courses. The results of such instruction should not be measured by studying the effect of one class, Babcock said, but by examining students' growth during the course of their college education and accounting for differences in their programs of study and personal experience.

Another study conducted by two professors, Byung Lee and George Padgett, who examined the effects of a law and ethics course on students at Elon College in North Carolina, found that ethics given during four or five weeks of a semester did not significantly change students' values. "Change is gradual and it requires thinking for a long time," said Lee.<sup>16</sup>

Such results suggest that, if students are entrenched in practicing journalism five days a week, the repeated exposure to ethical decision-making could prove fruitful for teaching ethics.

Dr. Ginny Whitehouse, who chairs SPJ's National Journalism Education Committee and is vice chair of AEJMC's Media Ethics Division, said, "More research should be done on the way ethics is taught to see how changing teaching methods affect students' learning. Current research often looks at what students learned without considering how they learned it."<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps educators should use industry standards as their guide to integrate ethics in journalism courses. Take, for example, the Code of Ethics for the largest organization of electronic journalists, RTNDA. The Radio-Television News Directors Association released its revised code of ethics at its national

convention, September 14, 2000, to address issues that decision-makers face in today's newsrooms.<sup>18</sup>

The revised code deals with "challenges raised by new technology and the Internet, commercial pressures on the independence of news, coverage of crisis situations and stories about children and other vulnerable individuals." In its policy, RTNDA states, "The organization wishes to foster the highest professional standards of electronic journalism, promote public understanding of and confidence in electronic journalism and strengthen principles of journalistic freedom to gather and disseminate information."<sup>19</sup>

"The revised code of ethics will be extremely helpful to news directors, Barbara Cochran, RTNDA president, says. "It's designed to help them make the tough calls that arise more and more often in the modern newsroom. . . . The revised code is our message to the public that along with press freedoms comes responsibility," says RTNDA Chairman Robert Garcia, vice president at CNN Radio in Atlanta. "This effort makes explicit our commitment to the public trust and to the principle of journalistic accountability."<sup>20</sup>

In the RTNDA code, "Public Trust" is one of the first categories following its preamble. "Professional electronic journalists should recognize that their first obligation is to the public."

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Being exposed to the code can help students critically think about "how" to cover a story. For example, when a political candidate comes to town to give a talk, how should the reporter cover the story? When should a reporter use an anonymous source in his or her story? The Code of Ethics is designed to serve as a guide for its members. But the code can also serve as a tool to help educate young journalists about how to make solid, sound ethical decisions.

While few schools offer an intense capstone experience such as South Carolina's Senior Semester, most have some type of laboratory experience where students can be immersed in the practice of journalism. According to a 1997 study examining "Radio-TV Journalism Curriculum: First Jobs and Career Preparation," data revealed that the majority of academic respondents said their programs had at least a one-day-a-week television news laboratory experience in their curriculum.<sup>20</sup> Obviously, a five-day-a-week experience would increase the learning curve with consistent repeated exposure to ethical deci-

sion-making. But due to the costs and expertise necessary for such a program, the proliferation of five-day-a-week semesters is not likely. Certainly, the one-day-a-week lab is the next best thing.

So dust off the professional code of ethics and let students live the challenge of practicing ethical journalism. And maybe,

when the next journalist or soon-to-be journalist receives a hot tip from an anonymous caller, he or she will have already found the ethical response.

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*Dust off the code of ethics and let students live the challenge of practicing ethical journalism.  
Maybe, when the next journalist receives a hot tip from an anonymous caller,  
he or she will have already found the ethical response.*

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- <sup>1</sup> Deni Elliott, in Elliot D. Cohen and Deni Elliott, eds. *Contemporary Ethical Issues: Journalism Ethics*. ABC-CLIO, Inc., Santa Barbra, Calif., p. 1.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Michael Davis. *Ethics and the University*, New York: Routledge (1999) pp. 111-142.  
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- <sup>5</sup> Deni Elliott, p. 2.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> "Americans' View of the Press," in PBS Frontline, 2000 [online]; available from <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/other/view2.html>>, accessed March 25, 2000.
- <sup>8</sup> Michelle Johnson. "Preventing good people from making bad decisions: Study shows need to incorporate ethics education throughout the journalism curriculum," *Quill* (Sept. 2000) pp. 76-77.
- <sup>9</sup> Wendy Barger and Deni Elliott. "Journalism ethics classes: Do they make better journalists?" *Quill* (Aug. 2000) pp. 24-25.
- <sup>10</sup> Johnson, pp. 76-77.
- <sup>11</sup> Davis, p. 112.
- <sup>12</sup> "The Teaching of Ethics I: The Teaching of Ethics in Higher Education," a report by the Hastings Center, New York (1979).
- <sup>13</sup> Interview, Dr. Kent Sidel, associate dean for undergraduate studies, University of South Carolina (Oct. 10, 2000).
- <sup>14</sup> Interview, Professor Rick Peterson, electronic news sequence Senior Semester, University of South Carolina (Oct. 10, 2000).
- <sup>15</sup> Barger and Elliott, pp. 24-25.
- <sup>16</sup> Johnson, pp. 76-77.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> "RTNDA Revises Its Code of Ethics," Sept. 14, 2000 [online]; available from <<http://www.rtna.org/news/2000/rricoe.sclasseshtml>>.
- <sup>19</sup> Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct, Radio-Television News Directors Association [online]; available from <<http://www.rtna.org/ethics/coe.shtml>>.
- <sup>20</sup> "RTNDA Revises Its Code of Ethics."
- <sup>21</sup> Sonya Forte Duh' and Lee Ann Zukowski. "Radio-TV Journalism Curriculum: First Jobs and Career Preparation," *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator* (Spring 1997) pp. 4-15.

# Interdisciplinary Team-Taught Model: An Ideal Worth Striving Toward

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**T**HERE ARE TWO QUESTIONS CENTRAL TO THE SUBJECT OF THIS ESSAY. Are professional philosophers the only academic practitioners qualified to teach media ethics? Do professional philosophers bring some things to the media ethics classroom that media practitioners do not? The simple answers are, of course, “no” and yes.” I will not make the claim that professional philosophers are the only scholars qualified to teach applied ethics courses such as media ethics. It is a claim that, as I will argue below, is clearly unsupportable. On the other hand, professional philosophers do bring something unique to the media classroom. In addition to being consumers of mass media, we bring the analytical and historical perspective necessary to examine moral concepts such as duties, obligations and rights, and basic philosophical concepts vital to the function of the mass media such as objectivity and truth. This essay will explore the role of the professional philosopher in the media ethics classroom, and conclude by arguing that the philosopher’s perspective is necessary but not sufficient for a successful media ethics classroom.

It is necessary because detailed philosophical training brings to the classroom a wealth of contextual understanding when it comes to terms such as “right,” “truth” and “objective.” Surely, a detailed examination of these terms is a foundational part of any media ethics class. It is not sufficient, however, for we could ask, why should philosophers alone run the media ethics classroom? For that matter, why do we belong in medical ethics? business ethics? environmental ethics? In many, if not most, cases, philosophers have not been practitioners in these fields. There is no question that having worked as a newswriter, nurse, human resources manager or chemical engineer gives a person a set of lived experiences that most academic philosophers will never have. This poses a fundamental limitation upon what a philosopher can convey to students, both in terms of embodied knowledge and credibility in such classes.

The key is to strike the balance  
between these two boundary conditions –  
the historical and conceptual expertise of the philosopher,  
and the lived experience of the media professional.  
Such classes are ideally team-taught  
through the shared perspectives  
of media practitioners and philosophers.

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The key, then, in an applied ethics class such as media ethics is to strike the balance between these two boundary conditions – the historical and conceptual expertise of the philosopher, and the lived experience of the media professional. Thus, such classes are ideally team taught, through the shared perspectives of media practitioners and philosophers. This will be demonstrated through the use of a conceptual framework known as “interrogative logic.”

**The Necessary Role  
of the Philosopher**

It is all too easy for academicians to get caught in the exciting minutia of our own disciplinary worlds. As a graduate student in philosophy, I had semester-long courses with such titles as “Explanation,” “Theory and Evidence” and “Probability and Truth.” Seemingly simple concepts, covered in great conceptual and historical detail for 16 weeks at the graduate level – and we barely scratched the surface. A casual glance at any media ethics textbook reveals a plethora of seemingly “everyday” terms containing profound philosophical content and long historical pedigrees, content as profound and pedigrees as long as those just mentioned above. “Truth,” “justice,” “evidence” and “objectivity” are all terms associated in discussions of the mass media and ethics. As citizens of a democracy, we are told, from a young age, some of the following imperatives:

1. *The media must be truthful.*
2. *The media must be just and fair.*
3. *Reporters must check their sources in order to verify them.*
4. *News reporting must be objective.*

When one examines each of the four imperatives, we find very quickly that, if free and open societies are serious about holding the media to such standards, then we are serious about holding them to an unrealistic, almost god-like standard.

Take the concept of “truth,” for instance. “*The media must be ‘truthful’.*” To be truthful is to make utterances that are based on truth. As the great logician Alfred Tarski described it, the statement, “Snow is white,” is true if and only if snow is white. This is referred to as the correspondence definition of truth. “Snow is white” is a true statement if and only if these symbols, “S-n-o-w i-s w-h-i-t-e,” are uttered in a world where, in fact, something called snow is really white. But now look what I have done. Something *called* snow? Isn’t “snow” really snow? Well, not really. “Snow” is a label that we speakers of English assign to a meteorological phenomenon of the winter season that accumulates on the ground, causes great joy for children and traffic headaches for their parents.

*Really* white? Well, let’s face it. “White” is a label that we English speakers assign to a particular optical phenomenon that is in-

dicated by the reflection of all colors of the visible spectrum of electromagnetic radiation. Even if you are willing to grant that snow exists (and even in my most skeptical moments, I am willing to go that far), you cannot prove it in any way that comes close to the certainty that we expect from the term “truth,” which by the way is 100 percent. And even if we grant the existence of snow, isn’t “whiteness” in the eye of the beholder? After all, it is an optical phenomenon. As an optical phenomenon, it exists physiologically in the proverbial “eyes of the beholder.” How can we be certain (remember, truth demands that level of 100 percent certainty) that the sensation that I have of what our culture calls “white” is the same sensation that my wife has when she utters “white.” We cannot.

So what of the correspondence definition of truth? Well, it certainly tells us what we expect a theory of truth to be – statements are true in as much as they correspond to the way the world really is. But that is the catch, isn’t it? This model of truth, the model that I think most descendents of European culture have in mind when we think of truth, requires a kind of omniscience. It demands that we be capable of knowing how the world really is so that, when statements such as “snow is white” are uttered, we can then check them against reality and judge them accordingly. This is of course where we philosophers have it easy, looking at simple statements such as “snow is white.”

My colleagues in mass communication do not have such a luxury. Not even the Weather Channel would report a statement as simple as “snow is white.” Instead, the media must deal with statements such as, “The Corvair is unsafe at any speed,” “Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone,” and “George W. Bush was elected president of the United States in 2000.” The strict verification of any one of these so-called statements of fact is impossible, as Corvair far from any possible objects with which to collide is almost certainly safe, the facts of the Kennedy assassination are forever clouded in the cloak and dagger world of the FBI, CIA and the Warren Commission, and the statement regarding the 2000 United States presidential election hinges on the definition of the term “election.” Most surely, George W. Bush is the president of the United States (not even my skepticism will sway me from that belief), but whether he was *elected* is a semantic debate best left to history.

Truth, much like justice, canons of evidential relations and objectivity, are deeply philosophical issues, rich with a content and complexity that I can only begin to reveal herein. In the Western philosophical tradition, they trace their roots far and deep, to the time of Plato and his doctrine of the Forms. Therein, Plato maintained that, by the sheer power of the intellect, the properly trained mind could discover a world of perfection. The world of Forms was a quasi-spiritual place, and the Christianity that came to dominate European civilization for over a millennium inherited Plato’s belief in an everlasting realm of ideal justice, everlasting truth

and pure objectivity. It just embodied them in a perfect and loving God. To hold the media to a standard of truth and objectivity, where by “truth” we mean correspondence with reality, and by “objectivity” we mean knowing that reality is as it really is, holds the media to a godlike standard. In short, is an impossible goal to reach.

Most philosophers have realized this since the 18th century and the work of Scottish empiricist David Hume. Hume’s empiricism, and the blatant honesty with which he pursued it, lead to a skepticism that made him at once empiricism’s greatest champion and harshest critic. Certainty, Hume tells us, is to be had only in the here and now of our sense perceptions. Once those fleeting instances become embedded in our minds, they are subject to the myriad influences of what Francis Bacon, Hume’s 16th century predecessor, called the four “Idols of the Mind.”

The Idols of the Tribe are those traits common to all humans – e.g., that we see with physical systems called eyes that can perceive only certain wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation, that we guarantee that the seemingly simple act of observation does not guarantee a window upon truth. No two people ever witness the same event in the same way. The Idols of the Cave are those experiences of each individual that make us all unique thinking subjects, thus in one stroke denying any kind of strong objectivity. The Idols of the Marketplace represent the force of language, making this Idol the most powerful. Humans are linguistic creatures, and whether we like it or not, inferences,

emotions, perceptions and other human mental state, in order to be conveyed to another, must be done through the abstract and thus incomplete use of linguistic symbols. Finally, the Idols of the Theatre represent belief systems that we have come to live as if reciting a script. These scripts are fluid, changing over time and having a direct impact on what counts as newsworthy and taboo for the media. We know many of them. A boat called “Monkey Business” forever changed the media’s relationship with elected officials and their sexual activities. Before Gary Hart, it was taboo to report on JFK and Marilyn Monroe. After “Monkey Business,” we will forever remember the phrase, “I did not have sexual relations with that women,” for it was no longer taboo, and certainly newsworthy.

Do these limits on our ability to know the truth mean that “anything goes”? Of course not. It does mean that standards of evidence become much more difficult to manage. It does mean that, rather than dealing with truth and falsity, we deal with much more vague subjective degrees of certainty. It is for these, and many more reasons, that the philosopher is a necessary component of the media ethics classroom.

**Why the Philosopher  
Is not Sufficient:  
Interdisciplinarity and  
the Logic of Questions**

Conceived of as a problem-solving activity, any discipline can be fruitfully viewed as a question-asking activity, driven by “why” questions such as “Why should I be moral?”

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“Why should reporters confirm their sources?” “Why should the media be free of corporate control?” and “Why is it wrong to commit slander?”

Risto Hilpinen argues that such questioning is best viewed as a *process of inquiry*, with the purpose of this inquiry being “...to find satisfactory answers to certain questions, and these answers can be found by presenting questions to various sources of information” (Hilpinen 1988, p. 15). Hilpinen recognizes that such questioning relies heavily on the pragmatics of inquiry. The pragmatics of inquiry simply position the inquirer in a context, creating a “belief system,” much as Bacon described in the discussion above. A belief system can be conceived of as a system of accepted propositions which serves as both the main product of investigative activity, and the context within which such activity occurs.

The very fact that inquiry is pragmatic, and thus dependent upon context, reveals that experience in a media context is a necessary condition for the study and teaching of media ethics and that, therefore, the philosopher without said experience is insufficient in this context.

Seen in this light, media ethics becomes an activity akin to “critical thinking,” an essential aspect of discovery-based learning and an important part of the contemporary undergraduate core. Most properly construed, critical thinking is a matter of asking the right questions, and properly ascertaining what follows from those questions (Hintikka and Bachman 1991, pp. 7-8, 30). For example, in Hilpinen’s scheme, belief systems are assessed based upon their ability to provide answers to *primary questions*. A primary question addressed to a belief

system expresses the questioner’s desire that his/her belief system provide some satisfactorily informative answer. Such an answer is defined as follows: “...the system gives a satisfactory answer to a question  $Q$  only when the investigator knows some proposition  $p$  such that  $p$  is a complete answer to  $Q$ ” (Hilpinen 1988, p. 18). This is the case only insofar as  $p$  is justified within the belief system.

We can easily imagine a series of questions asked within the contemporary corporate media context regarding whether or not a story regarding the dangers of genetically modified foods should be pursued. I have never worked in such a context, nor have most of my colleagues. As an environmental ethicist, my reaction is, “Yes, of course you pursue the story.” That is an answer from my pragmatic context. But what of the context of a reporter who works for a newspaper whose parent company also owns a biotech firm? These are cases where a belief system also contains a proposition  $q$  which may be inconsistent with  $p$ . The proposition  $p$  might be, for example, “The story must be pursued,” which the statement  $q$  might be, “The story might damage overall corporate earnings and should not be pursued.” Such a case is an instance of Hilpinen’s insistence that belief systems be evaluated only with respect to the questions asked of it. While most belief systems are somehow inconsistent, these inconsistencies are only problematic when they appear as contradictory answers to primary questions. In the case where the answer to a primary question is both  $p$  and  $q$ , and if ( $p \& q$ ) entails a contradiction, then the belief system containing them can justify neither of them. This is but one of the ways in which a belief system can provide an unsatis-

factory answer to a primary question (Hilpinen 1988, pp. 18-19).

Hilpinen refers to such instances as *knowledge situations*, which are to be resolved with *secondary questions*. Knowledge situations include the following:

- (a)  $Ba$  contains no (complete) answer to primary question  $Q$ ;
- (b1)  $Ba$  contains two or more conflicting answers to the same question; or
- (b2)  $Ba$  contains an answer which is not justified within the system (Hilpinen 1988, p. 23).

Hilpinen’s claim is that secondary questions are asked to fill in the empty spaces in a belief system, or to resolve a certain contradiction within the system. Rather than directly addressing the question to the belief system, the questioner attempts to access “...some external source of information” (Hilpinen 1988, p. 20). Ideally, then, media ethics and similar classes are interdisciplinary, team-taught classes. That external source of information can be the philosopher, if the media practitioner is the primary questioner, or vice versa, or some other source of information.

The fact that all questions are asked within the context of belief systems makes it all the more imperative that interdisciplinary subjects such as media ethics be taught in an interdisciplinary manner, preferably by teams of instructors. This may not, however, be feasible in many institutions, due to a lack of financial resources or faculty time. The team-taught model is, in this case, an ideal worth striving toward.

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