

Serious issues of media ethics and social responsibility arise frequently in all areas of mass communication. Almost daily, numerous ethical questions enter the conduct of newspaper, magazine, or broadcast or electronic journalism, and advertising and public relations.

This course is designed to assist students in thinking through complex ethical challenges they surely will face in a career in communications. We will attempt to answer the terribly complicated question of right or wrong, good or bad which inevitably arise (but which often defy clear-cut answers.) We will try to illustrate what is being done in the communication industry today and what others who came before us have done in matters of ethics and social responsibility.

The goal is a contemporary framework for discussion of ethical issues and, it is hoped, a great deal of introspective thought by students of journalism.

In the parlance of ethicists, this is not a course in "metaethics," the study of abstract principles. Rather, it is a course in "normative ethics," a discussion of specific, present-day media behavior in search of what is regarded as correct and what isn't. Attempting to even point at possible answers to ethical problems creates enormous risks, of course. Who, after all, truly knows what is "right" or "wrong" about how journalists operate, or how publishers and station managers conduct themselves professionally? Can there be a definitive answer to what is "good" or "bad" in advertising or public relations? We will draw heavily in this course on what individual journalists and others in mass communication do when they meet ethical challenges.

We will use numerous case studies and real-life illustrations drawn from current media behavior. But each student must understand that not even media "pros" always solve ethical problems satisfactorily, particularly under the deadline pressures and space/time limitations of daily journalism. So, the challenge to each student in this course is to create his or her own principled, thoughtful response to some of the pressing ethical questions of our time.

Just as you expect to graduate equipped with, say, writing style and reporting technique, so must you go forward equipped with a personal sense of ethics and social responsibility. A personal code, deeply reasoned and principled, must be part of the professional equipment each student takes into a career in mass communication.

Importantly, this course is structured to illustrate that the ethical strains and doubts confronting journalists don't always begin and end in the newsroom. They, in fact, arise in other areas -- yes, the newsroom, but also in management and the public conduct of a media institution as a corporate entity, and in the relationship between the media as a whole and other institution in our society.

Thus, our discussion of newsroom ethics will be cast against a wider corporate and societal backdrop. We cannot ignore the impact of profit, "image" and other corporate concerns on the ethical conduct and reporting techniques of the man and woman with a notebook and pencil or camera and mike in hand. It is useless to belabor the question of, say, an individual reporter's fairness in covering a story unless we also examine whether that reporter has been given sufficient corporate support and resources to be fair -- money and time to chase all sides of the story, the necessary newsprint or airtime to report a balanced account.

Nevertheless, corporations don't solve ethical problems; individuals do -- reporters, editors, news directors, publishers, newsroom executives. So, although we will examine the wider corporate or societal context, individual responsibility in ethical matters is a fundamental theme of this course.

Attendance is mandatory.

The course breaks down into three parts:

Part I: Ethics in the Pursuit of News. There is no rulebook, no widely held single code of ethics, so we'll sketch the philosophical framework for discussion of profession conscience in the newsroom. We'll look quickly at a 2,500-year-old mainstream of ethical debate leading into an examination of how each journalist inevitably meets, early in a news career, serious ethical issues. The theme of this section: Each journalist must build a personal approach to ethics within the context of his or her relationship with a supervising editor or news director and the reading or viewing public.

Discussion areas:

Utilitarianism and ethical duty; libertarianism, objectivity and social responsibility; the credibility gap.

Your personal code -- conflict of interest, privacy, good taste.

Ethics of technique -- adversarial relationship, making or reporting news, sources and your ethical technique, good news vs. bad news.

Your partners in ethics -- you and your public, the ethics of reporting and writing, you and your editor.

Part II: Ethics in the Pursuit of Profit. News organizations, their credibility questioned, must examine corporate attitudes toward ethics and social responsibility. Whether written or simply laid down by example, ethical codes increasingly guide conduct in advertising departments and business offices, as well as newsrooms. We'll look at the "countinghouse" and its impact on corporate ethics in an era when profit, not ethics, often motivates corporate management.

Discussion areas:

Corporate social responsibility, corporate ethics, components of a code.

Corporate profit and newsroom ethics, good journalism isn't cheap, journalistic elitism.

Ethics in the countinghouse -- advertising, personnel and other business sectors.

Changing the face of the media -- why groups expand, and will continue to do so; who sets corporate policy.

Electronic journalism, the ethical responsibilities of Internet users and bloggers.

Part III: The Media in Society. Public perceptions of the media are changing in fundamental ways. Influential people discuss seriously whether, in times of peace as well as war, the Fourth Estate can be permitted to barge about in public and private affairs, to operate independently of legal and societal restraints that govern conduct of other major institutions influencing American life. We'll consider whether society might feel compelled to write new rules for the increasingly powerful media.

Discussion areas:

The new corporate character -- the media lobby; the story (the media themselves) that is covered ever so gently.

Special problem areas -- terrorism and the media, spies and national security, the media go or don't go to war, the media and the presidency, business.

Public relations -- practitioner's personal ethics, institutional ethics, the PR industry and its standards.

The freedom of information battle, special interest pressure groups, the media and the law.

Throughout the course we will discuss alternative forms of communication, particularly blogs, and their impact on more traditional media and the public dialogue.

READING

Required text: Conrad Fink, Media Ethics (Allyn & Bacon, 1995.)

Students should become familiar with these codes of ethics (All are in the textbook):

American Society of Newspaper Editors, Statement of Principles.

Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, Code of Ethics.

Radio Television News Directors Association, Code of Broadcast News Ethics.

Dow Jones & Company, Inc., Conflict of Interest Policy.

American Advertising Federation and Association of Better Business Bureaus, Advertising Code of American Business.

Public Relations Society of America, Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations.

Important periodicals include American Journalism Review, Columbia Journalism Review, presstime, Editor & Publisher, Advertising Age.

Graduate students will be expected to perform at a higher level in term papers and in seminar discussion. In the first week of each semester, graduate students must meet with me for a discussion of additional and enriched material that will be expected from them.

GRADING

Your grade will be based 85 percent on term papers, 10 percent on class participation, five percent on quizzes.

TERM PAPERS

Students will write three term papers, one on each of the three sections of the course.

Paper #1. Select an ethical issue involving an individual reporter or writer. This could be, for example, how a reporter handled a question of invasion of privacy, good taste or objectivity in pursuit of a story. What were the facts involved? How did the reporter proceed? In your opinion, did the reporter proceed in an ethical, socially responsible manner? What alternatives did the reporter have? How would you have proceeded?

Paper #2. Select an issue of corporate ethics or social responsibility. This could involve, for example, a newspaper's code of advertising ethics, a broadcast network's news policy. Is the code/policy definitive? Is it adequately enforced? What weaknesses/strengths do you see in it? Or, you could examine a newspaper's approach to its responsibilities of producing a valid, responsible news report and, simultaneously, profit. Does the newspaper sacrifice a socially responsible role in pursuit of profit? In this second paper, we need a detailed study of a corporate (as contrasted with personal) issue in ethics and social responsibility.

Paper #3. Select from the third section of the course, The Media in Society, an issue involving the relationship of the media and other institutions in society. You could discuss the media vs. national security, or the media lobby and its efforts on behalf of the media's economic interests, or the relationship between the media and the presidency, business community, the church. The relationship between the public relations industry and other sectors of our society is an area fertile for exploration. So is the general area of freedom of information.

Term papers should be of a length sufficient for treatment of your subject -- and no longer. I'll provide no guidelines on length because developing judgment in such matters is part of your training for a career in mass communication. Each term paper should open with a short executive summary (a page or two) stating the facts and your conclusions. Take a stand in these papers; make a judgment on how the ethical issue under study was handled. Deadlines must be met, of course, and your writing, spelling, construction must be polished.

My room number is 234; the door is always open. Feel free to consult with me throughout this course.

Term paper deadlines:

- #1. By _____, submit a memo outlining your first term paper. The paper itself is due _____.

- #2. Outline _____. Paper _____.

- #3. Outline _____. Paper _____.

Addendum to Syllabus

I am informed University regulation requires the following statements must be added to all syllabi:

All academic work must meet the standards contained in "A Culture of Honesty." Each student is responsible to inform themselves (sic) about those standards before performing any academic work.

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The course syllabus is a general plan for the course; deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary.

Conrad Fink