

ENG 2205: Media Ethics

Fall, 2005

Office hours: M,W: 1:15-2:45
T,Th: 2:50-4:00
& by appointment

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COURSE OVERVIEW: What does it mean to be an “ethical” journalist? And how important is it that members of the news media act in an ethical way? Indeed, does it seem at times that the words “journalist” and “ethical” are a contradiction in terms? Or at least often incompatible? Do we sometimes associate **un**ethical behavior by journalists with getting ahead - by nailing the big story, or giving a nice boost to the ratings, or capturing the prized photo or the exclusive interview first? Are ethics simply a list of things that journalists should **not** do?

These and many other vexing questions will be explored this semester in Media Ethics, one of the courses required for the Minor in Journalism and arguably the most important class that an aspiring journalist should take. Many of the questions and issues that we’ll examine here defy simple answers or solutions, and that may prove confusing or frustrating for you at times. Don’t despair. Journalists around the world have been wrestling with ethical dilemmas for centuries - and have not always agreed on the most “ethical” resolution of those dilemmas. However, it is very important to **think about** and **discuss** both the options and the likely consequences of journalistic decisions before making them. Sadly, but not surprisingly, some of the most unethical practices of the news media can be traced to inadequate or hasty consideration of the likely consequences of media decisions prior to making those decisions.

We will also explore several less-discussed conditions/developments within the press that have overriding ethical overtones, such as the growing influence of both corporate ownership and large advertisers over newspapers, television stations, magazines, etc. In recent years, we have also witnessed the increasing influence of the so-called “tabloid” press over the “mainstream” or “responsible” media. Many believe that this blurring (if not extinction) of the once-clear lines between the tabloid and mainstream press poses a genuine threat to the integrity and reliability of the news media. And even more recently, the emergence of the Internet as a source of news - not to mention the home of thousands of “bloggers” intent on correcting, disproving or challenging “mainstream” news reports - has spawned a whole new array of ethical questions.

As suggested above, ethical quandaries can be difficult to solve. In many cases, the choice(s) facing the journalist is not a clear one between right and wrong, but rather between two almost equally **un**attractive alternatives. So we will not always agree on, or even find, the “right answer” to every ethical question we confront. Some of us, for example, may see nothing wrong with using a hidden camera (or microphone) to gather potentially incriminating information about someone or something. But others of us may view such practices with alarm, seeing them

as inappropriate or unethical behavior for a journalist. And still others of us may see information-gathering via a concealed device as acceptable in some situations, but unacceptable in others.

Typically, the “why” behind the way we feel about such practices is more important than “what” position we take. Hence, early in the semester we’ll examine a variety of ways of approaching and sizing up an ethical dilemma. The goal is to develop a rational, responsible and workable process or methodology to follow as we encounter different ethical challenges. We’ll look at various approaches to making sound ethical decisions that are rooted in the theories of several prominent philosophers from different eras. We’ll also look at something called the “Potter’s Box” to help us gain a better understanding of how ethical decision-making can be achieved. To be sure, the process or outline we favor may not work in all cases - or lead all of us to the same conclusion. But at least these methods will furnish us with a choice of paths, if not a blueprint, to follow as we seek the most ethically satisfying resolution of problems confronted by members of the Fourth Estate.

It’s also important to remember that media **ethics** and media **laws** are **not** the same thing. Laws determine what journalists are *allowed* to do, while ethics deal with what journalists *ought* to do as responsible members of a free society. At times, actions of journalists may be perfectly legal, but still not ethically sound. At other times, journalists’ actions may not be legal but may still be defensible from an ethical standpoint.

While I can’t promise to turn you into a more ethical journalist by the end of the semester, I do believe that you will leave this course with a greater understanding of, and appreciation for, both ethical and unethical practices by members of the press. We will achieve the course objectives in a variety of ways, including assigned readings, lectures, discussion sessions, case study debates, videos and guest speakers.

REQUIRED TEXT; OTHER READINGS:

–**Groping for Ethics in Journalism** (5th edition), by Ron F. Smith (Iowa State Press: 2003)

The rest of your readings will be found in handouts and in a special **CoursePak** that includes a variety of articles on issues involving media ethics. The CoursePak should be purchased this week from Bobby Anderson, English Dept. secretary, in the department office on the 2nd floor of Hill (room 204).

All readings **will** be discussed **on the date they are listed for** on the Course Outline. So please be prepared to discuss that day’s readings when you come to class - and note that **15%** of your grade in the course stems from class participation and preparation. If speaking up in class is difficult for you, please see me and we can make arrangements for you to e-mail your comments to me (or to the entire class). I do want to stress, though, that this class works best when there is **lots** of good class discussion and debate. So, if your spoken contributions are few and far

between **and** you fail to take advantage of the e-mail option, it will be almost impossible for you to do well in the class preparation/participation segment of the course.

HONOR CODE REMINDER:

As you may know, significant changes were made to McDaniel's Honor Code in 1999, many at the recommendation of students. Two key changes now **require** students to report to the professor any Honor Code violations that they witness other students committing. A second change **requires** faculty members to refer Honor Code violations to the Honor and Conduct Board rather than have the option of dealing with the violation by themselves. The best advice I can give you is very simple: Don't cheat.

You will be required to write the Honor Code pledge on all your work, and that means the actual pledge, not a rough approximation of it.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS; GRADE DETERMINATION:

–There will be a short essay, not to exceed 3 pages, that spells out your assessment of just how ethical you feel the press is. This essay will be worth 10% of your overall grade.

–There will be TWO exams, one before midterm and one after. They will cover what's been read, watched and discussed to that point and will account, collectively, for 25% of your grade.

–Each student will participate in one of the Case Study Debates (see description, next page) that will be held during the second half of the semester. This exercise will be worth 15% of your grade.

–There will be a medium-length (8-12 pages) research paper that examines some ethical issue involving the news media. I will provide a list of topics to choose from, although you are welcome to pick a topic of your own as long as I approve it in advance of your conference with me (conferences will be held about a month prior to the paper's due date). The research paper is worth 20% of your grade.

–There will be a final exam, on a date to be announced. The exam, which will not be cumulative, will account for 15% of your grade.

–Class preparation and participation will account for the remaining 15% of your grade. Students are also urged to be on the lookout for anything in the campus, local or national news media that raises (or reports on) ethical questions or concerns or which relates to something we have discussed, watched or read about in class. If possible, such examples should be brought to class for discussion purposes. Such contributions will count toward the class participation portion of your grade.

NOTE: An especially good place on the Internet to find reports on current ethical issues or controversies in the media is the "Romenesko" column produced five days a week by Jim

Romenesko. Find it by going to Poynter.org and clicking on the link for Romenesko's daily column. There, you'll find brief summaries of all sorts of press issues, some with ethical overtones, some not. The summaries include links to the newspaper, magazine or online site that reported on the issue. Visiting the Romenesko site daily (or even occasionally) will keep you updated on current ethical developments in the media, enable you to do better in the class participation phase of the course, and may provide you with ideas for your research paper topic.

ATTENDANCE POLICY; HANDING IN WORK LATE:

This course puts a high premium on classroom discussion and debate, especially when that discussion reflects a familiarity with and understanding of the readings. Accordingly, regular class attendance is considered vital to doing well in the course. Any student accumulating more than three unexcused absences will be inviting if not guaranteeing a lower grade.

No assignments will be accepted late, and no makeup exams will be given without an **exceptionally** good reason. If you know ahead of time that you cannot make a deadline, or be present for an exam or Case Study Debate, you should inform me of the problem well **before** the class in question whenever possible.

THE CASE STUDY DEBATES - WHAT ARE THEY?

During the course of the semester there will probably be four Case Study Debates (see Course Outline below for dates and topics). Teams of two (or possibly three) debaters will face off in these debates - one team taking the side of the news media, the other team making the case for the party allegedly victimized by the press. Handouts will explain the Case Study Debates in more detail.

EXAMS AND STUDY QUESTIONS:

It is my intention to provide study questions for each of the exams, including the final, about three or four days prior to the exam. However, there is no guarantee of this. Rather, whether the study questions are furnished or not depends entirely on the quality of class discussions for the material that will be on each exam. If the discussions go well, and it's clear that most students in the class are prepared to discuss the readings for each period, then the study questions will be made available. But if the opposite is true, and only a handful of students demonstrate the required preparedness for class, then the exam will be given without benefit of the study guide. The choice is yours.

EXTRA CREDIT:

Students may earn extra credit for the course in two ways:

1. Write a commentary on some issue or concern related to the course and get the article published in *The McDaniel Free Press* or in any other newspaper of your choosing.

2. Write a reaction paper to any of our guest speakers during the semester, or to any campus-wide talks by journalists. The paper should not exceed two pages (typed and double-spaced) and should not merely be a summary of what the guest journalist said in class. Reaction papers are due no later than **one week** after the speaker visited the class or the visiting journalist gave his/her talk.. **NOTE: On Thursday, Oct. 29, McDaniel alum and CNN Headline News anchor Thomas Roberts is expected to give a talk in 108 Hill Hall at Noon. Your attendance at this event is expected unless you've got a class at this hour.**

COURSE OUTLINE; READINGS:

Date	Topic	Readings
Week #1		
Mon 8/29:	What are ethics? Is ethical journalism an attainable goal or a mission impossible? Are the news media becoming less ethical? More ethical? Staying the same?	
Wed 8/31:	In search of principles - and ethical journalism - to counter the "ugly journalist" image; two laudable print and TV efforts	Smith, preface & Ch. 1 Part 1 of "King Hog" series (Handout from 8/29)

Opening essay on the ethics of the press due on THURSDAY by 4:00 in my office

Week #2		
Mon 9/5:	NO CLASS – LABOR DAY HOLIDAY	
Wed. 9/7:	Studying ethics through the years - from Socrates to John Rawls ; using the "Potter's Box" in ethical decision-making	Smith, Ch. 3
Week #3		
Mon 9/12:	Holding the media accountable: ethics codes, news councils, ombudsmen, etc. With possible guest speaker	Smith, Ch. 2 C-Pak: "New ethics code not to restrain ..." by Tallent & "The ombudsman puzzle" by Dorroh (Plus copy of SPJ Ethics Code)

Wed 9/14: Truth, objectivity & the pressures of journalism, with video
Smith, Ch. 4
C-Pak: "Re-thinking objectivity" by Cunningham

Week #4

Mon 9/19: Why so many mistakes? What can/should be done about it?
Smith, Ch. 5
C-Pak: "Three stories a day?" by Casselman

Wed 9/21: The sometimes difficult quest for diversity: In the newsroom, among reporters' sources, among the subjects of news stories
Smith, Ch. 6
C-Pak: "What works?" by Robertson & "Just add color" by Greenstein

Week #5

Mon 9/26: Diversity in its many forms, cont'd. With likely guest speaker
C-Pak: "The color of ratings" by Westin & "Suburban myth" by Kelliher

Wed 9/28: **FIRST EXAM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!**

Week #6

Mon 10/3: The biggest sins of all: making up things and stealing things - from Janet Cooke to Stephen Glass to Jack Kelley; how should fabricating, plagiarizing & manipulating video & sound be handled in the new video age. With video.
Smith, Ch. 7
C-Pak: "We mean business" by Rosen & "Viewer beware" by Potter

Wed 10/5: The plagiarism/fabrication outbreak: what's causing it, and what's the best way to respond to it?
C-Pak: "Confronting the culture" by Robertson & "Knocking down the stonewall" by Dorroh

Week #7

Mon 10/10: Sources: Handle with care!!!!
Smith, Ch. 8

Wed 10/12: Dealing with sources, cont'd.: the Chiquita Brands/Mike Gallagher/George Ventura no-win affair; are anonymous sources an endangered species?
C-Pak: "I trusted a reporter" by Ventura & "Under fire" by Smolkin

Week #8

Mon 10/17: NO CLASS – MID-SEMESTER BREAK

Wed 10/19: The privacy invaders: public’s right to know, or unwarranted intrusion? Smith, Ch. 9

Week #9

Mon 10/24: Invasion of privacy, cont’d, with video C-Pak: “On second thought” by Pride

Wed 10/26: **FIRST CASE STUDY DEBATE: ARTHUR ASHE VS. USA TODAY**

REMINDER: On Thursday, Oct. 27, McDaniel alum and CNN Headline News anchor Thomas Roberts is expected to give a talk in 108 Hill Hall at Noon. Your attendance at this event is expected.

Week #10

Mon 10/31: Press dealings with government, police & the military; are the media biased? Smith, Ch. 10
Lisher & “Access Denied” C-Pak: “Stalking a sniper” by Cochran

Wed 11/2: The Blogosphere: more than just thorns in the side of the mainstream press - but what about their ethical shortcomings? C-Pak: “Journalism’s backseat drivers” by Palser

Week #11

Mon 11/7: **SECOND EXAM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!**

Wed 11/9: Going undercover to get the news - when are deception, hidden cameras, etc. justified? Smith, Ch. 11

Week #12

Mon 11/14 **SECOND CASE STUDY DEBATE: FOOD LION VS. PRIMETIME LIVE** (with video after debate)

Wed 11/16: Compassion: Is there a place for it in Journalism? With possible guest speaker Smith, Ch. 12
Miller & “Images of war” by Robertson C-Pak: “Tough calls” by

Week #13

Mon 11/21: **THIRD CASE STUDY DEBATE: RICHARD JEWELL VS. THE PRESS**

*****TUESDAY, NOV. 22: RESEARCH PAPER DUE BY 4:00 IN MY OFFICE*****

Wed 11/23: NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week #14

Mon 11/28: The business of news: corporate profits vs. newsroom ethics in a time of tighter budgets and ownership conflicts. Smith, Ch. 13
C-Pak: “Taking care of business” by Vane

Wed 11/30: **FOURTH CASE STUDY DEBATE: THE *BOSTON HERALD*’S DECISION TO PUBLISH PHOTOS OF A WOMAN FALLING TO HER DEATH**

Week #15

Mon 12/5: Journalists & their communities; is public/civic journalism the answer? Smith, Ch. 14
C-Pak: “Maybe it’s not so obvious” by Potter

Wed 12/7: Freebies and financial concerns; summing up for the final exam; course evaluations. Smith, Ch. 15
C-Pak: “Both sides of the street” by Rieder

REMINDER: All readings are to be completed PRIOR TO the class they are listed for.

