

Ethical News

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Teaching values and moral development

A roundup of thoughts from this year's APPE session on teaching ethics

Editor's note:

The assignment was simple: How do you teach values and moral development to your media ethics students? The outcome was a lively and informative conversation in San Antonio.

A panel of five media ethics instructors engaged an audience at the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics conference in exploring pros and cons of values and moral development pedagogy. Panelists and audience members agreed that the topics are central to the mission, but disagreed about when and how they should be presented and assessed.

Here are excerpts of the panelists' recollections of what they contributed to the discussion.

Lee Wilkins,
University of Missouri:

I teach moral development at the end of an ethics course for graduate students because I want to give them some sense that this class is the beginning of a journey, and not the end of one. I have the students read Piaget's *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (the entire thing) and pair it with the film *Gandhi*. The goal of the discussion is to get the students to understand that adults in very adult situations behave in the ways that Piaget described—moving from self-interest and parallel play, through conformity and maintaining social order, to acting on universal principles.

In class, we spend a fair amount of time on Gandhi's analysis of a "journal"—you must have one to build a community—and on the moral development road that the *New York Times* reporter featured in

the film ("Walker") traveled. We also spend a lot of time on the other characters in the film, particularly those who behaved in ways that were morally problematic.

In class, I lecture the students through Kohlberg and Gilligan. We seldom have time to get much more in depth than that. I don't teach values, although I probably model some.

Patrick Plaisance,
Colorado State University:

I typically provide an overview of the moral development theories of Kohlberg and Gilligan in the first three weeks of the semester for a couple of reasons. First, because doing so, together with a writing assignment that asks students to explain an ethical dilemma that they had to deal with in their own

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The Terri Schiavo case puts ethical considerations in the news

David Craig
PF&R chair

The hotly debated case of Terri Schiavo presents an opportunity to consider how journalists can contribute to the public's understanding of ethical issues.

The family dispute and the broader battle over this Florida woman's care were covered heavily on cable news channels and in

other media outlets. Law and politics met ethics, and the case revealed Americans' deep conflicts over what constitutes appropriate care of severely injured or ill people, who should decide and what values should drive the decision.

Discussing the coverage on "Nightline," Ted Koppel said, "No matter what one's position on the greater issues, the Schiavo case degenerated into a media circus." Hal Boedeker, an *Orlando Sentinel* television critic, said on the same program that cable coverage was excessive and pushed aside

coverage of other stories such as a major Asian earthquake. He said the family dispute dominated discussion of broader matters connected with the case such as living wills, politics and ethics.

I have not systematically analyzed the coverage, but thoughtful attention to ethics was evident in some newspaper stories I reviewed on LexisNexis. For example:

•A piece in the *St. Petersburg Times* noted that the case may force Americans to

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lives, helps them to begin thinking of themselves as moral agents obligated to some higher form of accountability rather than some anchor-free, “me-generation” relativism. Second, it seems to help them in assessing media behavior later.

Regarding values, I think we lose credibility in the classroom the instant we begin to moralize. I strongly agree with Lee Wilkins and others that we must model important values. A major component of doing so is making clear that identifying an ethical problem as such is often half the battle. For example, an early reading assignment is David Shaw’s classic 1999 post-mortem story on the *Los Angeles Times*-Staple Center debacle. A good number of my students each semester, after they read it, are unsure what the problem is. “Seems like a good business opportunity,” they say. Only when we have a class discussion does the problematic nature of such a blatant journalistic conflict of interest dawn on them. I tell them not to feel badly—part of the objective of my course is to help develop what I call students’ “ethical radar.”

I’ve also found the film *The Insider* to be a good modeling tool. With the pressures of corporate consolidation becoming ever greater, the film remains a powerful example of the moral courage often required of those in the news media.

Lee Anne Peck,
University of Northern Colorado:

When I teach the stand-alone media ethics course, I start with Plato’s *Crito*, which shows the students the general principles that guided Socrates’ decision to die in prison: independence, courage, social responsibility, and justifi-

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cation for one’s acts. I also use Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” from the *Republic*; I explain they need to be the prisoner who escapes from the cave and comes back to the masses and tells them the truth. They should not be the puppeteers merely entertaining the masses.

I ask the students after three weeks or so what they stand for as media

professionals. We come up with a class list of professional, moral, aesthetic values and so on. We use that list when we discuss case studies. (I also have students in other classes, such as advertising and public relations, do the same thing.)

At the beginning of the course, I use Aristotle and his theory of moral development, which argues that if students and professionals are not given a regular dose of education in character building and moral reasoning, they will be unprepared for ethical dilemmas in the work world. That is why through practice (case studies in the classroom) and repetition (real-life decision-making in the professional world), moral development continues. There is more than “intellectual” virtue, which is learned through textbooks; moral virtue is learned through “habit.”

Jay Black,
University of South Florida:

After years of experimenting, I’ve settled on introducing moral psychology and values fairly early in my media ethics courses, because those literature-rich topics do so much to inform discussions and issues through-

out the semester. Case studies, journals, lectures, exams — pretty much the whole course — seem to work better when students have developed a theoretical and personal understanding of how value-laden their own work and the work of media practitioners tends to be, and how so much of what’s going on can be interpreted via insights from moral development theories.

There are risks when framing a course this way. For one, as they constantly compare “where they are” versus “where the theories tell them they might be,” the students’ self-exploration may engender a sense of moral insufficiency (what one of

my students called “the shame of being a knuckle-dragging, mouth-breathing moral troglodyte”). For another, there’s a tendency to ascribe all sorts of media behaviors to pre-conventional or conventional moral reasoning, or to confusion over values. The instructor has to be careful to help students strike an appropriate balance between objective and projective reasoning,

to help students enthusiastically explore their own moral journeys without unnecessary guilt.

Edward Spence,
Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics (CAPPE), Canberra, and Charles Sturt University, New South Wales, Australia:

The decision-making model I employ comprises three components: justification, motivation and compliance. I believe those three conditions are both necessary and sufficient for moral decision-making.

Justification and motivation, at least cognitive motivation, are primarily provided through rational arguments contained in the various contemporary ethical theories including Utilitarianism, Hobbesian Contractarianism, Kantian Contractarianism (John Rawls), Rationalist Ethics and

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Virtue Ethics (Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Alan Gewirth). Additional appeal to motivation for ethical action is provided through a study of the virtues and their relationship to the ethical sentiments (David Hume).

The virtues in conjunction with the moral sentiments are crucial for moral character that helps engender moral compliance in addition to the justified motivation for moral action provided by ethical meta-theory and ethical normative theory.

I believe that the meta-ethical level of inquiry is crucial and critical in teaching ethics and media ethics in particu-

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lar. The authoritative question of morality, "Why be moral?", is posed to the students at an initial stage of ethical inquiry through the celebrated Myth of Gyges in Plato's *Republic*. The students are encouraged to think for themselves the possible reason(s), if any, they personally and collectively have for being moral if they can choose to act immorally for their self-interest with total impunity.

The meta-ethical inquiry into the motivational question "Why be moral?" also provides the students with a critical criterion for conducting a comparative evalua-

tive analysis of the various contemporary ethical theories studied in the course.

Finally, the other crucial aspect of ethics I try to address is what I call the "meta-motivational problem of reception." The problem simply is how to present the theoretical material to students in a way that is both accessible and engaging for them.

My preferred pedagogical methodology is the innovative use of philosophy plays specifically designed and written to address key ethical issues at both a meta-theoretical and normative levels.

The philosophy plays help contextualize moral philosophical ideas into contemporary cultural settings relevant to the students' own personal and professional experiences and expectations.

[See the sidebar below for details about Spence's philosophy plays.]

All the (ethical) world's a stage: philosophy plays help get the message across

Wendy Wyatt Barger
Teaching chair

Our colleague from Down Under, Ed Spence, has a unique way of showing his media ethics students that philosophy can indeed be playful.

While Spence's approach to teaching media ethics is both applied and practical, it also contains a crucial theoretical component. The challenge (one we all know well) is finding a way to present theoretical material to media ethics students in a way that is both accessible and engaging for them. In other words, professors must find a way to talk theory in a way that speaks students' language; theoretical material must involve what Spence calls "relevant-contextualization."

For him, that relevant contextualization comes from the innovative use of philosophy plays – dramatic works of 20-30 minutes that are produced, directed and per-

formed by media ethics students. The plays, written by Spence, are specifically designed to address key ethical issues at both the meta-theoretical and normative levels. Two of his most recent productions – "The Philosophy of Love: Love in the Age of Terror" and "The Philosophy of Freedom" – are being undertaken by his senior media ethics students at Charles Sturt University this term. A short talk by Spence and a class discussion typically accompany the plays.

This effort to take philosophy out of "intellectually constraining" spaces such as classrooms began in 1997. "It was a way, once again, of rendering philosophy relevant and resonant to the common and shared concerns and interests of the citizenry of the modern polis," Spence says. Since 1997, the plays have been performed in restaurants, taverns, theatre spaces, vineyards, pubs, and even the Sydney Opera House.

The philosophy plays explore timeless questions. For instance, "The Perfect

Injustice," which is based on the Myth of Gyges, focuses on moral motivation – a topic particularly relevant to contemporary media practice. Why be moral, the play asks, if one can choose to act immorally out of self-interest but still appear moral? While the Myth of Gyges is centuries old, "The Perfect Injustice" places the question in a contemporary cultural setting and within the vernacular language relevant and resonant to the students' own personal and professional experiences and expectations."

Spence says the plays do more than just give students a context to think and talk about moral theory. Because they involve not only information but also performance, the plays can be more ethically transformative than lectures or case study discussions alone.

Perhaps the best part of Spence's idea is his willingness to share it with others. To learn more about the philosophy plays and read scripts from previous productions, e-mail Ed Spence at Espence@csu.edu.au.

What were the ethical lessons of the Kobe Bryant case?

Jack Breslin
Iona College

There is one profitable lesson the media proved once again in the Kobe Bryant case — crime stories involving celebrities get ratings and sell newspapers.

From a media ethics perspective, however, the lesson is more disconcerting. Now that Bryant and his accuser are out of the headlines — the criminal charges were dismissed last fall and the civil suit was settled in March — it is clear that the case added more confusion to the debate over the coverage of sexual assault cases, especially those involving celebrities. And saturation media coverage surrounding celebrity criminal cases continues to try the accused before any criminal trial starts — or in this case, doesn't start.

While some media outlets followed their policies by declining to identify the accuser, others not only named her, but also detailed her personal and sexual history. For example, in Colorado, where the drama unfolded, the *Rocky Mountain News* named the woman, "citing fairness issues and the fact that she filed a civil suit in her own name, seeking monetary damages" (*Denver Post*, Oct. 17, page C1). Its competitor, the *Denver Post* followed its not-naming policy, "reasoning that fallout from the case proves that a powerful stigma still surrounds sexual assault" (Ibid.).

Former *Des Moines Register* editor Geneva Overholser, now at the University of Missouri, has long advocated the naming of victims as originally argued in her 1990 column. That column was followed by a Pulitzer Prize-winning six-part series about a victim going public. When Overholser used the name of Bryant's accuser in her Poynter Institute online column, "Time to Name the Accuser," it was removed, which resulted in her quitting the blog. In submitting her resignation, Overholser stated that both plaintiff and defendant in a civil suit should be named.

"I believe that choosing to name only one party in this suit is a matter of ethics, not editing," she wrote in a letter to *The New*

York Times published Sept. 26, 2004.

Overholser told the Associated Press for a Sept. 17 article: "My strong feeling is that we in the media are doing something unprincipled when we decide we know which of two people in a criminal case needs to be protected."

After the courthouse staff mistakenly released the accuser's name and other private details in case filings on a state Web site, her identity, photograph and love life flooded the Internet and other media outlets, including tabloid publications and a nationally syndicated radio talk show.

Getting lost in the naming debate is the right of the defendant to a fair trial by an unbiased jury of one's peers.

So while the media didn't use her name, they gave certainly enough other information. As Vicki Haddock wrote in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Not naming Kobe Bryant's accuser is becoming almost pointless. It's like handing her a tiny origami

umbrella to shelter her from a shower of mud."

Victim advocates insist that naming sexual assault victims without their consent will discourage others from coming forward. That problem intensifies when the alleged rapist is a celebrity. Some believe that the Bryant case has weakened victim protections and increased the fear of losing confidentiality.

Sarah Graham Miller of the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network told the Associated Press in September that hotline calls increased, but there was no way of tracking whether callers reported their cases to police. "It really is a double-edged sword for the alleged victim," Miller said in the Sept. 17 article. "On one hand, she wants to keep herself safe. On the other hand, she can take control of the situation. There's no clear answer to this question."

Is the rape "stigma" then placed by society, the media (news and entertainment) or the victim herself?

Editor Charlie Gay of *The Journal* in Shelton, Wash., defends his paper's naming policy as "good basic journalism." In fairness, if you name the accused in a criminal trial, you should name the accuser. Keeping secret and silent about a victim's identity

only furthers the stigma of rape, he argues (see John Vivian's *The Media of Mass Communication*, 2005, page 195).

Getting lost in the naming debate is the right of the defendant to a fair trial by an unbiased jury of one's peers. With the media examining every fiber of evidence, every character flaw, every martial infidelity before voir dire begins, will a juror really admit having a predetermined verdict if that means sacrificing the limelight of a televised trial? Can primetime criminal justice shows or *Court TV* make today's jurors overconfident about their ability to render a fair and impartial verdict?

A survey of my 70 law and ethics students (together in one course) at a private Catholic college revealed overwhelming opposition to the media naming the victim, with a few circling "don't know" or "it depends." The responses on the class BlackBoard discussion forum were more revealing, and at times, misinformed.

"Kobe Bryant has no history of sexually assaulting anyone," a male student wrote. "In fact, he has no criminal record at all. On the other hand, the alleged victim has a history of falsely accusing men of raping her. She is psychologically troubled. Because none of us knows what went on in that hotel room that night, we have to base our opinions on these facts.

"The name of the alleged victim should not be released unless it is clear that she is a gold digger," he continued. "If the woman is more concerned about Bryant's money than anything else, she is not longer the alleged victim, she becomes the one doing the victimizing."

Another male student addressed Bryant's concerns. "If everyone is presumed innocent before they are convicted then shouldn't Kobe's name have been held secret too?" he wrote. "People see Kobe and think 'rapist.' Now that we know the truth that it was rape, should we be able to look at the woman and think 'liar' or 'slut?'"

So for future ethical case studies, this one comes out a draw. But what happens when a celebrity allegedly rapes another woman? Will she come forward or hesitate based on the experience of Bryant's accuser?

"I really felt sorry for the girl," commented the city editor of a small suburban newspaper. "She obviously didn't realize what she was in for."

The 'invention of journalism ethics': a preface

Editor's note: *The following excerpt is from the preface of a recently published book by Stephen J.A. Ward, associate professor of journalism ethics at the University of British Columbia and MED member since 1998. The book, published in February by McGill-Queen's University Press in Montreal, Quebec, is available at www.mqup.mcgill.ca*

From *The Invention of Journalism Ethics: The Path to Objectivity and Beyond*, By Stephen J. A. Ward

This book brings a philosophical and historical perspective to the study of journalism ethics. As a work in the philosophy of journalism, the book is a systematic attempt to understand the editorial standards espoused by journalists since the printing press. The result is a theoretical framework for conceptualizing the evolution of journalism ethics and a new concept of journalism objectivity.

I call the framework a rhetorical theory of value change in journalism. This framework views the ethical assertions of journalists as a form of persuasive, rhetorical speech. Journalists appeal to ethical norms as part of a rhetorical strategy to defend their practices. The aim of editors' ethical rhetoric is to establish, maintain or enhance their credibility and the credibility of their publications. Ethical rhetoric is a crucial factor in the maintenance of a healthy communicative relationship between journalist and reader, or journalism and society. Without a solid, credible, communicative relationship, journalists run afoul of social critics and regulators, and lose the support of readers. My rhetorical theory asserts that the kind of ethics that defines journalism in any era — the norms that editors appeal to rhetorically — is determined largely by this communicative relationship. In turn, this communicative relationship is shaped by a number of factors: the available technology, accepted practices and economic, social and political conditions.

A history of journalism ethics, therefore, must examine how journalism's commu-

nicative relationship with the public has evolved and how these changes have prompted the espousal of particular norms. To gain such insights, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary, employing philosophy, ethics, science, economics and social history. A full understanding of journalism ethics requires that we plunge into the complex history of our culture.

The book pays special attention to the evolution of one of these ethical norms, the ideal of objectivity. It exposes journalism objectivity's long roots in our culture, as far back as ancient Greek philosophy and early modern science. Having set out this history, I develop my theory of journalism objectivity, called "pragmatic objectivity." I defend, without apology, the concept of journalism objectivity, but the concept that I defend is not the traditional idea of objective reporting as a neutral description of "just the facts." Instead, this book proposes a theory of objectivity that stresses the testing of journalistic interpretations in various contexts. Within the following chapters, readers will find both an apologia and a critique of objectivity, a history of objectivity and a look into the future.

A reformulation of objectivity is important because the traditional notion of journalistic objectivity, articulated about a century ago, is indefensible philosophically. It has been weakened by criticism inside and outside of journalism. In practice, fewer and fewer journalists embrace the ideal of traditional objectivity, while more and more newsrooms adopt a reporting style that includes perspective and interpretation. Traditional objectivity is no longer a viable ethical guide.

Pragmatic objectivity will not satisfy the extreme viewpoints that fuel the debate sur-

rounding objectivity. No doubt, academic skeptics of objectivity will regard my proposal to invigorate objectivity as too little, too late. For these writers, several decades of trenchant criticism of the "myth" of objectivity in science, law, ethics and journalism is proof enough that the concept is discredited, or in irreversible retreat. For adherents of traditional objectivity, my theory of pragmatic objectivity, with its leniency toward interpretation and value judgments, will appear to be an abandonment of objectivity. Nevertheless, I believe that my reformist position is the path to follow. We cannot return, conservatively, to traditional notions of objectivity constructed for another news media in another time. Nor is abandoning objectivity a viable option. Journalists continue to need a clear, vigor-

ous norm of objectivity to guide their practice. The best option is to reform objectivity so that valid criticisms are met and important practices of objective reporting are preserved. Without a thoughtful reform of objectivity, we risk losing a much-needed ethical restraint on today's news media. What we need is a progressive and philosophically sophisticated notion of objectivity that corrects stubborn misconceptions that have deep historical roots. We need a notion of objectivity

that reflects our current understandings of knowledge and inquiry. The ideal of objectivity, properly understood, is vital not only for responsible journalism but responsible scientific inquiry, informed public deliberations and fair ethical and legal judgments. The peculiar Western attempt to be objective is a long, honourable tradition that is part of our continuing struggle to discern significant, well-grounded truths and to make fair decisions.

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address deeper issues such as how to talk about medical ethics amid rapid technological change and what should prevail when a conflict arises “between life and liberty, two founding ideals of the American promise.”

• A *Los Angeles Times* story explored the perspectives of a wide variety of religious traditions on the ethics of artificial nutrition.

• An article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* connected the political and moral dimensions of the case in framing the national debate. The lead said: “The extraordinary intervention of Congress and the president into the Terri Schiavo case Monday served as an inkblot test for a nation conflicted over the ethics of death and the role of religion and morality

in policy-making.”

Topics that touch on bioethics — such as human cloning, genetic testing and assisted suicide — always provide an opportunity for public discourse on ethics when they

Topics that touch on bioethics — such as human cloning, genetic testing and assisted suicide — always provide an opportunity for public discourse on ethics when they enter the public eye through news coverage.

enter the public eye through news coverage. The same can be said for stories about business, government or journalism, though they often lack the visceral life-and-death edge of medical stories.

However, my past observation suggests that few news organizations make the most of these opportunities. Ethics tends to be treated as a secondary angle or dealt with in a superficial way.

Coverage of high-profile ethics cases like the Schiavo case may shed some light on

ethics if journalists:

• Consider doing stories that focus on the ethical dimension of the case and the issues it raises, rather than framing stories only in terms of politics or law.

• Seek a diverse array of sources with insight on ethics, including scholars with both secular and religious perspectives.

• Point readers or viewers to Web-based resources for further information on the ethical issues connected with the topic — including, when appropriate, materials that may help them personally such as models of living wills.

Instructors can use ethics cases in the news to get students thinking about this angle of coverage and its potential value to the public. In some cases, professors may be able to contribute their own thoughts by acting as story sources or writing opinion pieces.

It would be a utopian goal to declare that all of this discussion should lead to agreement across the public on ethical decisions, but at least it may foster understanding of others’ and one’s own perspective and the reasons behind them.

Send items for the next issue of **Ethical News** to newsletter editor Stephanie Craft at crafts@missouri.edu

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