

Ethical News

The newsletter of the AEJMC
Media Ethics Division

Division head
Vice head/Programming chair
Secretary/Newsletter editor

Elizabeth A. Skewes, *University of Colorado, Boulder*
Patrick Lee Plaisance, *Colorado State University*
Seow Ting Lee

Spring 2008
Volume 11, No. 3

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Looking ahead to
Chicago '08 2

Philosophies as
means, not an end 3

The meaning of
professional relevance 4

AEJMC Teaching
Workshop 4

Media Ethics Magazine 5

- Visit the MED home page at http://jcomm.uoregon.edu/~tbivins/aejmc_ethics/index.html
- Have an announcement or an article to share with MED members? Email the newsletter editor at stlee@ilstu.edu

'Ethics' without the philosophy of ethics

Patrick Lee Plaisance
Vice Head/Programming Chair

The field of media ethics seems to be in a period of momentous ferment. In teaching as well as research, the maturity of the field appears to be accelerating. Last spring, the field's leading scholars convened "Summit II" to consider the development of media ethics in the last 20 years. Scholars continue to publish important and useful texts. The *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* is a destination for first-rate theorizing and research. Moves by communication and journalism programs across the country to incorporate media eth-

ics into the core curriculum have become the norm. We are in the final years of a productive 10-year colloquium series – with talk of possibly continuing the event.

Everyone wants a "piece" of media ethics or recognizes the urgency of considering its implications. Personally, this point

was driven home for me in the weeks leading up to the December meeting of AEJMC programmers in St. Louis, where the program for our August convention was hammered out through the infamous "chip auction." Demand for co-sponsorship from a wide range of groups was impressive.

And yet. The ferment of the field is inspiring, and we all benefit by an increasing number of scholars and engaged practitioners. Media ethics is "sexy" right now, and that's great. But some problems have arisen from the eager embrace of ethics. Occasionally, it has been hard to discern genuine interest in understanding and contributing to media ethics from a desire to merely

(Continued on page 2)



The April Fools' Day joke on media credibility

Chris Roberts
Professional Freedom
& Responsibility Chair

Imagine that the Coca-Cola Co. doubled the sweetener in Sprite it sold on one day a year. Say it happened on the first day of the fourth month, just for giggles.

A few folks might not notice. A few might lapse into hyperglycemia. Maybe most would spit it out and know they had been taken in by a good-natured hoax on April Fools' Day.

This won't happen, of course, because even people who sell fizzy sugar water know the dangers of misleading their consumers.

Yet mass communicators—most of whom

ought to know better—cannot resist the urge.

This year's collateral damage from April Fools' Day includes:

- Public relations executive J. Peter Segall, who paid \$322.20 to *The Washington Post* for an April 1 ad lamenting the death of a still-living friend. *The Post* didn't say what he paid for the April 2 retraction, the cost to his reputation, or how he comforted the woman whom the paper said "spent two hours crying after seeing the ad."

- The Texas television station that didn't do any original reporting before telling its noon news audience about a retractable room planned for a racetrack. Too bad the station didn't read to the bottom of the Texas Motor Speedway press release, where "APRIL FOOLS" was printed.

- KTAR radio in Phoenix, which on April 1 told listeners of plans to turn interstates into toll roads. Arizona Department of Transportation officials knew the stunt was coming yet still managed not to be amused by the confused and angry callers.

And that's just "mainstream" media. Among the online jokesters were news.com, which published a spoof story about the classified Wikipedia site where spies argued over Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and the South American disc jockey who posted online a sex tape he claimed involved pop star Shakira.

The New York Times' Mike Zizza wrote about the trend at

<http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com>, under an

(Continued on page 3)

PHILOSOPHY OF ETHICS, Continued
from page 1

be seen (or heard) talking the talk of ethics. The true meaning of ethics work also has been battered a bit. I have seen books and journal articles with “ethics” in the title but, strictly speaking, no real effort to explicate, apply or refine ethics theory.

Clifford Christians, in what undoubtedly will become considered a landmark work, explores some key theoretical challenges for the field in the latest *Journalism and Communication Monographs* article. “As a subset of professional ethics, media ethics has established itself also over the last two decades as a scholarly enterprise with its own subject matter,” he noted. “A crucial issue is whether our theorizing is adequate.” Christians, with his characteristic, widely admired erudition and wisdom, details some of those theoretical challenges, including the question of relativistic thinking and the usefulness of utilitarianism as a moral paradigm. He is far too generous of a spirit to be explicit about any concern over the quality of scholarly output in the field. But more often than I would like, I see examples of work that touts itself as “ethics” yet has little to do with the philosophy of ethics. Instead, the work is really talking about “best practices.” I’m sure most of us have seen ethics work that moralizes, that proselytizes, that vilifies or apologizes. Yet none of this constitutes ethics work properly understood. “Ethics begins when elements of a moral system conflict,” Deni Elliott wrote. And while we all are interested, in varying degrees, in constructing normative frameworks for media practice, it is helpful to remind ourselves of her critical distinction.

In one recently published ethics text, a prominent public relations researcher offers all of one sentence – *one!* – discussing Aristotle. The scholar was more generous with Immanuel

Looking ahead by looking back

Elizabeth Skewes
Division Head

As we head into the summer and, I hope, the day-to-day press of classes and papers and conference deadlines eases a bit, it’s time for those of us in the Media Ethics Division to tackle a task that AEJMC President Charles Self has asked each of the divisions to undertake.

The “state of the field” report that Self wants after the convention this summer is designed to be a critical look – for us, at least – at where we stand as scholars, teachers and citizens.

Those who were at the midwinter meeting in San Antonio, Texas, at the annual Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE) conference, got us off to a good start. And we’ll need to continue the conversation at the business meeting in Chicago.

But I’m hoping we can have a robust conversation online in June and July in advance of the Chicago meeting. You’ll get an e-mail with a URL when the discussion board is up and running.

In the meantime, here’s a summary of what we talked about in San Antonio to kick-start your thoughts.

First, in terms of outreach:

- Those of us involved in media ethics should consider getting involved with the media literacy movement and with doing more outreach. Media literacy provides an opportunity to connect with the public about the role of ethics in the field.

- We may also find opportunities for outreach in issues involving media economy, and we should look for points of entry in that field.

- We need to enhance the idea of the public intellectual.

The discussion then focused on teaching:

- There are lots of people being asked to teach ethics who may not have the background or expertise to do so, which is not the same for newswriting or law. This is both a problem and an opportunity.

- Ethics doesn’t need to be someone’s area of research in order for them to teach ethics, though. Otherwise, the class could only be taught as a large lecture.

- MED already is working on the issue of teaching through the precon-

ference workshop held each year at the annual AEJMC conference. But it may be time to expand the workshop so that a portion of it each year is focused on a “boot camp” that helps people new to teaching ethics get grounded in the field.

- There also may be a need to take the workshop

(Continued on page 4)



Kant and John Rawls, devoting *two* sentences for each. Unfortunately, the John Rawls reference mischaracterizes one of the philosopher’s central claims. Another recent book, this one for journalists, features “ethics” in the title as well. The authors take just a few paragraphs in the introduction to hurriedly describe the work of Kant, Aristotle and philosopher W.D.

Ross in a few paragraphs, yet the central claims of these figures are never explicitly referred to again for the remainder of the book.

This kind of superficial treat-

ment should not be happening, and these examples demonstrate the relative immaturity of the field. I am confident that editors and reviewers would be much less likely to allow similarly

I’m sure most of us have seen ethics work that moralizes, that proselytizes, that vilifies or apologizes. Yet none of this constitutes ethics work properly understood.

questionable or simplistic treatment of other important concepts or theories in communication today – cognitive processing, say, or priming, or the third-person effect. We should be

spending efforts trying to make key philosophical frameworks more accessible and demonstrating how, more than ever, we need to take them seriously and get them right when it comes to

media practice. And we do have this – an inspiring amount of it, in fact. But we also have ethics scholarship that appears to write ethicists out of the frame entirely, that summarizes work of ethicists so brutally that the philosophy constitutes mere speed bumps on the way to making moralistic judgments about media behavior. Ethics should be more than a catchy, marketable word in a title.

Certainly, good ethics work doesn’t merely mean dutiful quotes and references to Kant and Aristotle in the right places. It does mean sustained efforts to apply, adapt and discern various ethical frameworks in ways that increase the quality of our deliberation. It doesn’t simply tell us what is right or most acceptable in a given situation, but obligates us to learn to show *why* one philosophical principle should guide our thinking over another.

Philosophies as means, not as an end

Bastiaan Vanacker
Teaching Chair

It is a grading dilemma all too common to media ethics teachers: A student analyses a case study, spots the ethical issues, asks the right questions and comes to a conclusion that is ethically sound, but in the process of doing so, totally misinterprets or oversimplifies a philosophical theory. If media ethics were a philosophy course, a D would be the logical result. In the context of a media ethics course however, where most of us usually have about one or two class periods available to squeeze 2,500 years of philosophy into, can we fault the students for taking some liberties when it comes to applying the philosophies?

This question is all the more relevant because even from within our discipline, we hear criticisms about how media ethics textbooks and instructors reduce complex moral theories to oversimplified slogans that do not accurately reflect the philosophers' writings. One need only to peruse through some issues of JMME or attend some of our academic conferences to notice concerns about this slogan approach to ethics.

This criticism comes in many forms, but a few seem to come back repeatedly: We tend to reduce Kant to mere rule following and ignore some other important aspects of his theory, we reduce Mill's utility principle to a simple calculus that promotes mob inspired majoritism and when we discuss Aristotle's golden mean we see it as a principle for guiding action, while in fact it is guideline for developing moral character. In a recent issue of JMME, Patrick Plaisance, Lee Anne Peck and Deni Elliott raise some of these concerns.

I learned a lot from reading these and other articles and they have kept me on my toes when it



Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Socrates* (1787) illustrates the philosopher's control and nobility in the face of death

comes to teaching and researching media ethics. Yet, the fact remains that I only have a limited amount of time to discuss these philosophers in a class

where I also need to talk about blogs, Jayson Blair, codes of ethics, accountability systems, economic pressures, hidden cameras, codes of interest, advertis-

ing, PR, Judith Miller etc. Given these time constraints, it is nearly impossible to provide the students with anything more than a coarse overview, especially when instructing students who have not taken an ethics class before.

It would be naïve to think that by merely having our students read the *Nicomachean Ethics* or the *Metaphysics of Morals*, they would gain a much deeper understanding. To really understand Kant's ethics one needs to also be familiar with his epistemology, and to really understand his theory of knowledge one needs to understand how it relates to British empiricism and Cartesianism. Philosophy cannot be studied in isolation, and unless students come in with some philosophical baggage we have to be realistic about how much philosophical instruction

(Continued on page 5)

APRIL FOOLS' DAY JOKE, *Continued from page 1*

entry entitled "Souring on April Fools' Day." He links to *Radar Online* editor Alex Balk, who went out of his way to promise no April Fools' gags. "If you see something that seems particularly outrageous or hard to swallow," Balk wrote, "we probably just got it wrong."

As a guy who's written April Fools' Day stories for campus papers – and nearly been fooled by folks playing tricks when I was a reporter – I'd like to declare a moratorium on most of the shenanigans. At the risk of sounding like a bore or a boor, here are three reasons why:

■ 1. Sometimes we're the fool.

It's hard enough to get the facts straight when sources mislead you. In March, *The Los Angeles Times* was fooled by an imprisoned con man whose fake FBI documents implicated rapper Sean "Diddy" Combs in the death

of rapper Tupac Shakur. Later that month, *The New York Times* was fooled by a college student who faked a "rickrolling" at a college basketball game. (Don't know about rickrolling? Ask a student.)

Throw in the previous example of the Texas TV station fooled by a press release from a trusted source, and you end up with needless reminders to the public that you can fool some of the journalists some of the time.

■ 2. Sometimes we're not good at it.

Ask anybody who has ever judged the "humor column" category in a journalism contest: It's hard to write funny. Maybe that's why most of the April Fools' stuff you see seems sophomoric at best and libelous at worst. At least one campus newspaper I know of has paid libel damages for a cheap shot at a private person.

■ 3. Sometimes we're too good at it.

Lots of people seemed fooled by Jezebel.com's April 1 "news" that it had been sold by owner Gawker Media to CondeNast. Less than two weeks later comes real news that Gawker actually is selling three of its sites. When fiction melds too well with facts blended by a news organization, it's easy for the public to become confused.

The bottom line is that messing with the truth once a year suggests that it's OK for news-focused mass media to be casual with their credibility – even for a light-hearted diversion on a day when most folks should expect it. Given plunging credibility ratings and a public that perceives that media already are too casual with truth, giving in to April Fools' Day may be dangerous.

Or maybe I'm the fool. Either way, you'll have something to talk about in your classes next April 1.

LOOKING AHEAD, Continued from page 2

idea on the road, perhaps by joining up with Poynter, to provide ethics teaching education to people who can't make it to the summer workshop. These sessions could be hosted regionally at some of our campuses. We also might look for other venues, like the APPE conference, to offer workshops.

- Next year's APPE meeting also would be a good place to hold a special session on ethics across the curriculum.

- MED should create a website for new ethics teachers. The site could have modules that could be developed out of the AEJMC workshops. It

could include syllabi, resources, links and lists of "best practices," among other things.

So these are the ideas and concerns that came up in our first discussion about the state of the field. Of course, we need more ideas, and we also should consider where we stand in terms of our scholarship.

Keep an eye on your e-mail for a URL to a site that will let us keep the conversation going until we meet in Chicago. And if you're there on the preconference day, we'll try to get some time then to talk more about all of this informally in advance of the business meeting.

AEJMC PRE-CONVENTION TEACHING WORKSHOP

Teaching Ethics in an Online, Multimedia, Interactive World

The Media Ethics Division's pre-convention workshop, "Teaching Ethics in an Online, Multimedia, Interactive World," will consider how to best help students identify new ethical questions and the theories to evaluate them. Faculty will gain insight in how to better assist students in understanding the ethical implications surrounding interactivity, blogging, convergence, and online plagiarism.

The pre-convention workshop will be held from 1 to 6 p.m. Tuesday, Aug., 5, 2008. Please register for the workshop with your regular AEJMC conference registration. Fees are \$50 for faculty and \$40 for graduate students.

Jane Singer, co-author of *Online Journalism Ethics: Traditions and Transitions*, will anchor the ethics discussions. Workshop faculty include: Clifford Christians, University of Illinois; David Craig, University of Oklahoma; Lou Hodges, Washington & Lee University; Maggie Patterson, Duquesne University; and Lee Wilkins, University of Missouri. Workshop directors are William Babcock of Southern Illinois University and Ginny Whitehouse of Whitworth University.

What do we mean by "professional relevance"?

Jack Breslin
Research Chair

Recently I attended a panel discussion in New York City featuring five national political correspondents and two campaign press managers on media coverage of the presidential campaign.

While there were some thoughtful insights about covering the closest presidential primary race in recent memory, the shocking political downfall of New York Governor Elliott Spitzer dominated the discussion. The panel, sponsored by the Center for Communication [www.cencom.org] was held only a few days after a prostitute took down a Democratic hopeful for the '12 presidential race.

An audience member, a journalism student from New York University, where the discussion was held, asked raised an ethical question, namely should reporters consider a story's impact on Spitzer's family or any other political family when a scandal drags them into a media feeding frenzy.

"When there's a story [like Spitzer], you want to know everything," a *Washington Post* editorial writer replied. But the rest of his comment was interrupted by the moderator (who did that frequently).

"You can't worry about the impact on the family," the author-media critic snapped, as he motioned for the next questioner.

So much for media ethics in political report-

ing, I thought.

That does not mean, however, that the panelists or anyone else in the room had no interest in what we teach, research and discuss. Media ethics wasn't the topic that night, so the moderator steered the discussion back to the presidential race and Spitzer.

Why don't media ethics get more attention among the professional media? Does the professional community consider media ethics relevant?

That might be a strange question coming from the winner of the 2007 MED Professional Relevance Award. Yet the issue still nags me whenever I gaze at my coveted plaque. Will anyone covering crime victims ever read my paper on ethical guidelines for such reporting? How many journalists, advertisers, public relations practitioners or other mass media professionals ever read an AEJMC convention paper on media ethics or any other mass media discipline?

If they don't read our work, should we strive to make it more professionally relevant? Or do media professionals, especially those with degrees in mass communication, have a responsibility to continue their education by reading scholarly and professional journalists?

Does the academic community have a duty to engage professionals and actively share our work? Some AEJMC divisions often include working professionals in their conference panels, such as last year's Law and Policy Division panel which featured six prominent journalists covering the U.S. Supreme Court.

MED does not have a precise definition for "professional relevance" in giving the award.

The judging officers have looked for practical, thoughtful and well-written papers that might be valuable to the working media.

In writing a scholarly paper for consideration at an academic conference, does the author worry more about professional relevance or scholarly rigor? A research paper which might interest a media professional past the second page might be soundly rejected by a peer reviewer from the academic community. Which award is more helpful to one's CV – top scholarly paper or professional relevance?

Many media ethics professors, including some reading this reflection, worked in some area of mass media before joining the academy. Be honest – in your professional career did you ever read an academic or trade journal after you finished your undergraduate or graduate studies?

In most newsrooms if a copy of *Editor and Publisher* was on your desk, your colleagues assumed you were job hunting. During my reporting days, I was a faithful subscriber to *Columbia Journalism Review*. Not only did I read every article, but I also sent in a poorly written headline from our newspaper to "The Lower case" back inside cover page. They didn't use it.

During my decade of entertainment publicity with Fox and NBC, there was one academic moment when a publicity executive brought a copy of the *Journal of Broadcasting* to a staff meeting. In one of his usual rambling monologues, he misinterpreted the results of a questionable study on audience

(Continued on page 5)

Media Ethics Magazine

Although every member of MED is concerned with the same things that *Media Ethics* magazine is interested in, it is probable that many MED members are unfamiliar with the magazine.

Media Ethics started 20 years ago as a newsletter ("*Media Ethics Update*") carrying meeting announcements and information listing professional opportunities.

It was established in response to one of the recommendations of the 1st U. S. Media Ethics Summit meeting held in Massachusetts in 1987. It didn't take long before it was in demand as an outlet for commentary, opinion, and research in the field. At that point, although the "announcements" function hasn't been dropped, the name was changed, and it took its place as a magazine.

Currently published twice a year in an 8.5" x 11.5" format (and on line at mediaethicsmagazine.com), its length varies from 32 to 54 pages, depending largely upon the supply of good manuscripts in the field of media ethics. Although the last two issues contained articles, reports and polemics and a bibliography by (alphabetically) authors such as John Armstrong, Ralph

Barney, Jay Black, Michael Bugeja, Judy Buller, Clay Calvert, Andrew Cline, Thomas W. Cooper, Richard Crew, Bryan Denham, Susan Drucker, Russell Frank, Robert Fulton, Robert Gardner, Howard Good, Gary Gumpert, John Hamer, Marie Hardin, Kenneth Harwood, John C. Merrill, Robb Moss, Ioannis Papadopoulos (an appreciation of frequent contributor Claude-Jean Bertrand), Manny Paraschos (who publishes a regular column on media ethics around the world), Jane Peterson, Robert D. Richards, Jane Singer, Douglas Peret Starr, and Tammy Swenson-Lepper, it is always on the lookout for more good manuscripts.

Media Ethics is eclectic in editorial content and style (poetry and satire are not unknown in its pages) and its goal is to provide a forum for opinion and research articles on any subject pertinent to the ethics of mass communications. It is not biased toward or against either "new" or "old" media or topics. It is open to all points of view from all sources and venues, including media professionals, scholars, and students. (However, all submitted manuscripts are subject to editing for clarity at the

discretion of the editor, John Michael Kittross, who zealously maintains the magazine's policies of independence and inclusion and has been a member of MED since it was founded.)

To submit a manuscript, merely e-mail it to editor@mediaethicsmagazine.com or send it by U. S. mail to *Media Ethics* Magazine, 186 Tremont Street, Boston, MA 02111. Styles may vary, but the editor tries to make source citations accessible to readers.

To subscribe (\$10 for a year; \$20 for copies that must be mailed outside the U. S.), contact assistant@mediaethicsmagazine.com or mail your check and address (payable to *Media Ethics* magazine) to the address above.

Although many announcements of upcoming meetings will be provided online, there will be no printed spring 2008 issue because of the need to devote all human and other resources to the publication of a several-hundred-page book to be titled *Trajectory: A Vision of Media Ethics Past, Present and Future*, based on the U. S. Media Ethics Summit II, held in 2007. A copy of this volume will be sent to all subscribers.

PHILOSOPHIES AS MEANS, Continued from page 3

we can undertake in the context of a media ethics course.

The challenge of ethics instructors is to find –dare I say it– a golden mean between a slogan approach to ethics and having unrealistic expectations about how much philosophy we can teach in a media ethics course.

In my class this year, I discussed the U.N. Human Rights Committee 2002 upholding of a French ban on "dwarf tossing," in a case brought forward by a little person who was challenging such a ban, because it deprived him of earning a living. The HRC upheld the ban partly on human dignity grounds, in a ruling firmly grounded in Kantian ethics. It was a great way to engrain in students mind the important role of human dignity in Kantian ethics. I also discussed David's famous painting *The Death of Socrates* (which can be seen in the Metropolitan in New York), as Socrates' self control and nobility in the face of death is perhaps one of the best illustrations of what the Greeks considered virtuous. I like to think that these examples somehow gave my students a more complex understanding of Kant and Aristotle.

To come back to my question from the introduction: If a student in a couple of weeks turns Kant into a utilitarian thinker on the final exam, she probably will not have to count on much mercy. But if a student uses the categorical imperative in a way that somewhat belies its original meaning, yet still produces a thoughtful analysis, I might let it slide. In a media ethics course after all, we should use the philosophies as means, not as an end.

PROFESSIONAL RELEVANCE, Continued from page 4

use of television program listings in local newspapers versus national publications. As I began to politely comment the study, a colleague nudged my foot to remind me that the meeting was getting close to lunchtime and that I shouldn't challenge the boss, especially when he was wrong. So much for an academic dialogue in the NBC Press Department, yet that scholar did make a minor contribution to the professional community.

In the past few months, I have conducted an unscientific survey among media professionals, including our graduate students, guest speakers, former colleagues and that distinguished panel, concern-

ing their interest in scholarly papers and academic conferences. The results revolve around two common responses. If they read an academic journal article, it was for a term paper or other college assignment. But they *might* read one, if the topic interested them or would help them in their work.

"Most people in newsrooms today are just trying to survive," a veteran feature writer for a medium-sized suburban Gannett newspaper commented. "They really don't have time to Google academic journals for meaningful ideas on media ethics.

"About the only time might be a discussion of media ethics in a newsroom is when you and your editor talk about some concern about privacy or the authenticity of

a source."

As for that distinguished panel, I asked one participant (who will remain anonymous since I did not ask to quote directly) what kind of academic journal article would spark his interest.

"Show me one that's written by someone who knows something about journalism and maybe I'll read it," the veteran print journalist replied.

Another panelist offered a more thoughtful comment since he has frequently read law review articles in his work.

"Maybe if the professional world and the academic world got together, there might be more relevant articles written and read," he stated. "But there seems to be quite a gap between them right now."