

ETHICAL NEWS

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- Have an announcement or an article to share with MED members? Email the newsletter editor at bvanacker@luc.edu

Why moral philosophy is still relevant today

Shannon A. Bowen
 Research Chair

We received a crop of theoretically strong papers this year, challenging common media practices and applying ethical theory in new ways. The special paper call, "Is moral philosophy still relevant today?" drew current research applying the ideas of philosophers such as Rawls, Kant, and Aristotle. The work of more recent ethical theorists was also represented, by papers applying MacIntyre, Benhabib, and Bok. Scholars are using classical and modern ethical theory to analyze the rapidly changing world of multiple-sourced personal news generation, such as Twitter. Using the theories in such a way illustrates the timelessness of ethical theory that we often mention in our classrooms as one of the main strengths of moral philosophy.

Each of us can meet the comment of a skeptical student; "Why do we need to learn this old stuff?" with new examples based on the vitality of this year's group of AEJMC papers. All of these papers add something to the literature about the application of moral theory to ethical challenges that we face in many communication contexts, from the newsroom to public relations and organizational communication. The health and relevance of moral

philosophy in both theory and application to media ethics should delight the members of this division! (Please plan to see this exciting group of top papers in the special call, and the professional relevance award winner on Wednesday at 5 PM).

Another provocative trend you will see explored in ethics research is illustrated in our top papers panel from our open call. These papers explore the ethics of face and appearance, from the perspectives of deception, organizational reputation, physical face appearance, and the Chinese concept of Guanxi as maintaining face. These top ranking papers naturally fell into such a tidy topic. Such serendipity will surely make for an interesting session! (Please plan to see these papers at 10 AM on Wednesday).

Papers are slated for presentation in each session according to their scores from reviewers. The highest rated paper is first, the runner up is second, with the third and fourth ranked papers following suit. I was worried that this year's paper submissions would be decreased due to the economic downturn. Reports of falling university endowments, slashed travel budgets, and rising fuel costs provided real reason to worry. However, our submissions only saw a slight decline to 38 competitive paper submissions, just under the 41 papers submit-

ted last year. We accepted a total of 22 papers for a 57% acceptance rate, boosted up from 42% by the addition of six poster sessions. In a competitive division such as ours, all of the accepted authors deserve a round of applause for their research!

Recent crises in the mortgage and automobile industries, banking, and government have illustrated the importance of ethics and the travesties that can follow a breakdown in ethics. It is heartening that our division continues to be a robust forum for ideas and ethical theory in these financially challenging times.

Most importantly: A big "thank you" to all of our paper reviewers for performing this Herculean service! You are too often unsung heroes, so AEJMC will now recognize paper reviewers in the convention program. I would like to encourage all MED members to please consider reviewing papers next year. We were short on reviewers this year with only 27 volunteers. This deficit is one that could threaten the viability of our division and the research paper competition next year. Being a paper judge is a fulfilling service and lets you read cutting-edge research, so please volunteer (email me at sbowen@syr.edu)!

Cheers to all our reviewer-heroes, and see you in Boston!



Neuroscience & moral psych: Lessons for media ethicists

Patrick Lee Plaisance
Division Head

Do we have free will? For ethicists in general and media ethicists in particular, that has never been a real question. Of course we do. Go back and read your Kant, you might say: a cornerstone of his framework for moral agency is his careful documentation of our free will – our Willkür, as he says – and how it serves as the foundation for his persons-as-ends principle. Each individual is morally obligated to treat other humans with a particular kind of respect because of their capacity for rationality and their right to exercise their free will. Autonomous agency is a solemn mantra of a range of classical and contemporary philosophers from Aristotle to Robert Audi.

And yet... New developments in brain imaging, neuroscience and moral psychology are changing the landscape in which we work. In 2007, science journalist Dennis Overbye wrote: “A bevy of experiments in recent years suggest that the conscious mind is like a monkey riding a tiger of subconscious decisions and actions in progress, frantically making up stories about being in control.”

Neuroscience research is challenging some fundamental philosophical assumptions. For one, moral philosophers have long told us that our moral judgments should be grounded in our reasoning capacity. But the “flash” moral judgments we tend to make every day appear to involve a part of the brain that is very different from the part we use when we engage in rational thinking and careful deliberation. For another, the idea of free will may be more illusion than fact. Overbye quotes Mark Hallett, a researcher at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke: “Free will does exist,

but it’s a perception, not a power or a driving force. People experience free will. They have the sense they are free. [But] the more you scrutinize it, the more you realize you don’t have it” (Overbye, 2007, p. D4).

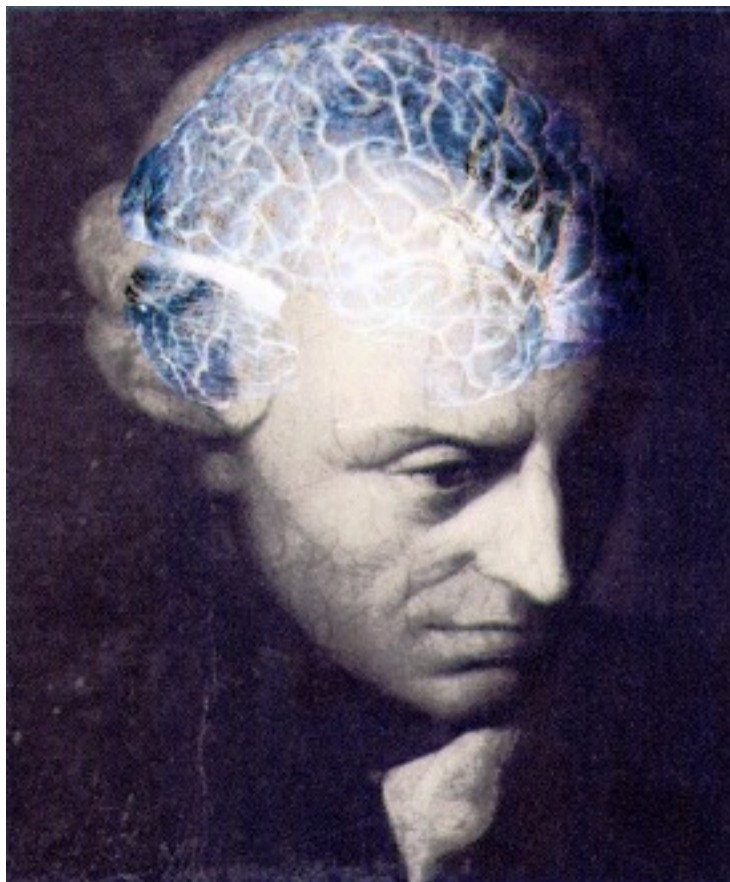
While much of our field has been preoccupied with philosophy-oriented normative theorizing, all these developments are opening new, exciting and important avenues for research for any media ethicist who is paying attention. While we don’t necessarily need to go get medical training in neuroscience techniques, it would help if we familiarized ourselves with theories developed in the area of moral psychology and were able to make sense of the research based on data from neuroimaging scans.

Research using brain imaging and efforts to document cognition processes already have had far-reaching effects for media professionals. In advertising, this work has called into question basic assumptions about marketing research. One leader in the field has actually

suggested renaming that very category of work as “consumer and market learning” – and urged new “CML” executives to start hiring neuroscientists for their insights into the consumer brain (Rubinson, 2009, p. 8).

The systematic efforts to bring moral-psychology measures to bear on media sociology that have just begun to emerge in the last few years should, I believe, become a central focus of the field. Data using these tools on media professionals – journalists, PR professionals, marketers – will help us develop fuller normative explanations for what constitutes moral action in media.

And if we are serious about contributing to the maturity of media ethics as a field, we all should be paying attention. A good start would be to mark our calendars to attend the AEJMC mini-plenary session, “Brain and Media: Embracing Neuroscience in Journalism and Communication,” which will be from 3:15 to 4:45 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 5, in Boston.



References

- Overbye, D. (2007, January 2). *Free will: Now you have it, now you don't*. New York Times, D1, D4.
- Rubinson, J. (2009, March). The new marketing research imperative: It’s about learning. *Journal of Advertising Research* 49 (1): 7-9.



Neuroscience research is challenging some fundamental philosophical assumptions.

Media Ethics Division Panels

AEJMC Convention, Boston 2009 — August 4 – August 8

Tuesday, August 4 – Pre-Convention

- 1-5 p.m. MED Teaching Ethics Workshop
International Media
- 7- 10 p.m. Cliff Christians Dinner, Legal Seafood Restaurant (registration required, contact: John Ferré, Louisville)

Wednesday, August 5

- 10:00 – 11:30 a.m. Refereed Research Session: The Ethics of Saving Face
- 1:30-3:00 p.m. PF&R Panel: Ethics and Entertainment
Co-Sponsor: ESIG
- 3:15-4:45 p.m. Mini Plenary
Brain and Media: Embracing Neuroscience in Journalism and Communication
PF&R Panel
Co-Sponsors: VCD, CJIG, CTM
- 3:15-4:45 p.m. MED not cosponsor; Cliff Christians featured panelist.
Mini Plenary
Normative Theories of Media Worldwide: Issues of Responsibility and Freedom Research Panel
- 5-6:30 p.m. Refereed Research Panel: The Modern Relevance of Moral Philosophy

Thursday, August 6

- 8:15-9:45 a.m. PR&R: Challenges to Ethical Reporting during a Media “Frenzy”
Co-sponsor: Magazine
- 11:45 a.m. -1:15 p.m. PF&R Panel: Hot Topics: Journalism at the Crossroads: After Newspapers, Then What?”
Co-Sponsor: SPIG
- 3:15-4:45 p.m. PF&R: The Impact of FCC v. Fox Television Stations, Inc.
Co-Sponsor: Law and Policy
- 5-6:30 p.m. Refereed Research Panel – Facing Today’s Ethical Issues
- 8:30-10 p.m. MED Business Meeting

Friday, August 7

- 8:15-9:45 a.m. Research: The Legacy of Clifford G. Christians
Co-Sponsor: CSW
- 12:15-1:30pm Scholar-to-Scholar Session
- 3:30-5:00 p.m. PF&R: The Journalism Academy and New Media’s Quest for Digital-Age Business Model: Who Speaks for Ethics and the Public Good?
Co-Sponsor: CCJIG
- 5:15-6:45 p.m. Refereed Research Session: Morality Examined in the Distance, Transparency, Public Relations, Visual Imagery and Politics

Saturday, August 8 No MED Programming

Boston's media ethical woes

Jack Breslin
Programming and Vice Chair

As we gather in Boston this August, what a fine city to reflect upon the state of mass media ethics. One of the cradles of American journalism (with nods to New York and Philadelphia), Boston's patriotic press fanned the flames of revolution which led to our nation's standard of media freedom. But despite its storied past, Boston has also witnessed several memorable embarrassments in its fabled journalism community. Here is a summary of some of the most famous ones.

On a sweltering July afternoon in 1975, *Boston Herald-American* photographer Stanley Forman responded to a fire call in Marlborough Street in Back Bay (just blocks from our conference hotel). When he arrived at the scene, a five-story apartment building was fully engulfed. At the top of the fire escape, a frantic mother and daughter were huddled with veteran firefighter Bob O'Neill shielding them from the approaching flames. Just as O'Neill grabbed an aerial ladder, an iron support collapsed.

While O'Neill hung on, the mother and daughter tumbled helplessly. Admitting later that he acted on sheer instinct, Forman captured their final free-falling moments on film. Since they fell behind a fenced area, he did not see the impact. The daughter miraculously survived, but the mother died from her injuries.

Back at the *Herald-American* dark room, Forman and his co-workers stared at the startling images. In an interview for TNT's 1999 documentary "Moment of Impact: Stories of the Pulitzer Prize Photographs," Forman does not mention any ethical considerations about publishing the photographs, which resulted in considerable controversy. While their publication led to reform in fire safety laws, the worldwide printing of such dramatic photographs of the mother falling to her death raised concerns about sensationalism, as well as compassion and harm to her surviving family. The photographs earned Forman his first of two Pulitzer Prizes.

On October 23, 1989, Boston police answered a frantic call from a white man saying he and his pregnant wife had been robbed and shot by a black man who stole their car after a hospital birthing class. Carol

Stuart, 30, died. Her infant son succumbed 17 days later. Her husband, Charles Stuart, 30, picked a suspect out of a lineup, but was later himself accused of murdering his wife. Stuart was later found dead in an apparent suicide, after his brother fingered Charles as Carol's murderer.

After finding Stuart's body, police released their prime suspect, a black paroled convict, and received much criticism for violating his constitutional rights. The graphic, sensational, saturation coverage of the case and some faulty reporting led to criticism of the Boston media for igniting fears of black violence toward whites and fanning racial tensions (Noonan).

The Boston Globe's most famous ethical embarrassment was the hot topic of AEJMC's Baltimore convention (my first) in August, 1998, when popular columnist Mike Barnicle resigned after accusations of plagiarism. He was accused of copying jokes resembling George Carlin's *Brain Droppings*, which he originally denied, and of lifting quotes from media critic A.J. Liebling. *Barnicle* is still writing columns and regularly appears on national TV, but his website biography does not mention the *Globe* incident. Prior to *Barnicle's* sudden departure, another respected columnist, Patricia Smith, was fired in June, 1998, after admitting she made up stories, quotes and people in numerous columns (Christians, 67-69).

With the Internet age facilitating the publishing of visual images without much ethical considerations, the *Boston Phoenix* was criticized for publishing a violent and graphic video despite the devastating impact on the victim's surviving family. In 2002, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, 38, was kidnapped and murdered in Pakistan by militants. The three-minute video of Pearl's beheading was released by his killers and then appeared on numerous obscure websites. *The Boston Phoenix* was the first American media outlet to feature the video on its website. The alternative weekly also ran still photographs of Pearl's severed head in its print edition (Patterson and Wilkins, 249-250).

As stated in *The Boston Globe*, the *Phoenix* was accused of "sensationalism, poor journalistic judgment, and insensitivity to Daniel Pearl's family" (Jacoby). In a web statement entitled "Daniel Pearl Death:

Thoughts on Political Pornography," dated June 4, 2002, Phoenix publisher Stephen M. Mindich expressed his outrage over Pearl's execution and stated that the video "should galvanize" condemnation of those responsible.

So listen to some Boston's media members at the convention panels and sample the latest news from its electronic and print sources, then ponder the city's media legacy. But whether the city's newspapers misreported who was responsible for the Boston Massacre or whether the renowned *Boston Globe* will survive, the Boston press has made its mark – for better or worse – on America's mass media and their ethical dilemmas.

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Teaching ethics with the help of Hollywood

Kati Tusinski Berg
Teaching Chair

In the last issue of *Ethical News*, Don Wycliff addressed teaching the ambiguity of ethics in his guest commentary about teaching journalism ethics at Loyola University Chicago. Don passed along the following lesson: "The conversation's the thing." I could not agree more. At the beginning of the semester, I tell my students that the success of the course depends on their active participation and that I expect lively debate on the issues at hand.

However, I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel as if I am the only one in the room who is excited about the concepts and case studies. So how do we get the conversation going? What tools can we utilize to break down difficult ethical theories and philosophical approaches? How can we encourage our students to dissect an ethical dilemma and come up with multiple compelling arguments?

I try to engage my students with stories from movies, TV shows, novels and popular culture to help them evaluate and understand moral issues. We usually begin each class talking about ethics in the news. Some days we watch an ad on YouTube, go to a corporate website, or download a controversial photograph. Even though this might take a few minutes, I believe the visual element is critical to the students' understanding of the issue. The abstract is made real when the students see the images; thus the conversation begins.

I also use movies to get the conversation about ethics going because it enables the visual learners in the class to see the images, abstract the concepts and analyze the situation from their own perspectives. As teachers, we need to be aware of our students' needs and integrating a film into our classes might encourage the visually-oriented students to better grasp the material. Good and Dillon (2002) note that their book, *Media Ethics Goes to the Movies* grew out of course they taught: "We compared notes and found that abstract ethical theories became vivid for our students when played out in the dramatic narrative of film" (p. ix).

For years, scholars have written about the pedagogical importance of using movies



to teach ethics. Lee Wilkins (1987) wrote an essay that explains her use of certain films, outlines her criteria for selecting films, and lists films that could be successfully used in mass media ethics courses. Good and Dillon (2002) assert, "when used astutely in the classroom, movies can become a valuable teaching tool, a powerful lens through which to examine media professions" (p. ix). Berger and Pratt (1998) conclude that certain films can "make ethical inquiry less abstract than it should be and ethical self-questioning more relevant to business agendas than it is at present" (p. 1822).

In my experience, movies enable us to define crisis moments, distill moral issues and discuss at a meta-level the narrative being presented. I like to show *Toxic Sludge is Good for You* in Principles of Public Relations because it provides a raw and critical perspective from which we can discuss the role of public relations in a democracy, and *Ernon: The Smartest Guys in the Room* in Issues in Corporate Communication because it allows the students to arrive at the obvious moral conclusions on their own.

Another great resource is *The Moral of Story* by Nina Rosenstand. The sixth edition of this book includes coverage of and examples from recent research, events and films. After flipping through this book, I decided to begin my graduate ethics course

by showing *Return to Paradise* because it demonstrated nuances of morality and personal responsibility.

I encourage you to weigh the costs (giving up precious class time) and benefits (engaging students and getting the conversation started) of using films in not only your media ethics course but also any course in which you discuss ethics. It is our responsibility to elucidate complex moral dilemmas for our students and we need all the help we can get in doing so.

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Impressive line-up in MED panel on future of journalism

Jack Breslin
Programming and Vice Chair

In what promises to be a lively if not contentious discussion of the future of journalism in a country with fewer newspapers and more online news sites, five journalists will square off in Boston in a PF&R session sponsored by Small Programs and MED on Thursday, Aug. 6.

The star-studded panel will be comprised of two Pulitzer Prize winners, including one from this year; the director of the Nieman Foundation's "Watchdog" program – who once edited the Watergate articles of Woodward and Bernstein; a former copy editor and page designer of the now-defunct Rocky Mountain News; and a prominent Connecticut newspaper publisher, Michael Schroeder, who was brave enough to buy two dailies earlier this year that were on the brink of being shuttered by their owners.

The special "hot topic" session is titled "Journalism at the Crossroads: After Newspapers, Then What?" The discussion will focus mainly on who or what will replace

investigative reporters as their numbers dwindle, and more entertainment-minded news people take their places.

One of those watchdogs, Paul Giblin, won a Pulitzer Prize in April for local reporting that was done for the East Valley Tribune in Mesa, Ariz. Giblin's five-day investigative series, "Reasonable Doubt," uncovered abuses by the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office's illegal immigration-enforcement operation. But in what many see as an example of what is wrong with journalism today, Giblin was laid off by the Tribune not long after winning his Pulitzer and now works for an online news outlet he helped found.

The third panelist, Barry Sussman of the Nieman Foundation, founded NiemanWatchdog.com which went online in 2004. The onetime Washington Post special editor and author of three books founded the site to help reporters frame questions on important issues.

The panel's second Pulitzer Prize winner, Eileen McNamara, won first place in

the commentary category in 1997 while a columnist for the Boston Globe. Now a fulltime journalism professor at Brandeis University, McNamara continues to write and has been sharply critical of The New York Times for threatening in May to shut down the Globe, which it purchased in 1993 for \$1.1 billion.

The fifth panelist, Kimberly Humphreys, is a veteran journalist who worked as a copy editor and page designer at the Rocky Mountain News prior to that paper's demise a few months ago. Since then, Humphreys has led the effort called IWantMyRocky.com to launch a news/analysis site about the industry. Like McNamara, she has been harsh in her criticism of the Rocky Mountain News' top executives.

The "Journalism at the Crossroads" hot topic panel was assembled by Kim London and Terry Dalton of Small Programs. The session is slated for Thursday, Aug. 6, from 11:45-1:15.



Teaching Resources Tip

Bastiaan Vanacker
Newsletter Editor

On Friday May 1, 2009, the Center for Ethics and Journalism at the University of Wisconsin Madison hosted its first annual conference on journalism ethics. Over 100 people attended The Future of Ethical Journalism and engaged in debates ranging from the future of investigative journalism to the ethics of new media. The sessions were streamed live over the Internet and are archived, together with the incoming comments from viewers: <http://www.journalism.wisc.edu/ethics/wordpress/>

One session in particular might be of help to ethics teachers looking for material. In the second session of the day, Ethical Situations: Tough Calls in the Newsroom (http://www.journalism.wisc.edu/ethics/wordpress/?page_id=6) four current and former media professionals shared with the audience a tough ethical call they had to make on the job. Moderator Lee Wilkins then engaged the audience in a lively discussion on what the "right" course of action would have been in each situation. At the end of the session, the professionals explained to the audience what they had done and why.

The format of this session could easily be mirrored by ethics teachers (provided they have the technology available in the class room), who could show the video of the professionals laying out the ethical dilemmas, and then become incarnations of Lee Wilkins as they elicit comments from willing and not so willing students. If the class room discussion is anything like the discussion in Madison last May, it should be a rewarding experience for both students and instructor.

While some of the scenarios did not strike me as very compelling or complex when I first heard them, the perspectives shared by the experts on the panel and in the room provided even these apparent ethical no-brainers with depth. The ethical conundrum presented by Scott J. Anderson (at about the 33 min. mark in the video), former senior political producer at CNN.com captured in my opinion the theme of this conference the best and made for the most captivating discussion. But all four scenarios could be used in the classroom; having students compare their ethical decision making processes with those of professional journalists should be a valuable educational experience.

Do you have any ideas for a good case study or teaching tool in the classroom? Please contact the Ethical News editor at bvanacker@luc.edu

Students thinks it's okay to deceive — if they like the deception

Chris Roberts
Professional Freedom & Responsibility Chairman

Here's a two-part poser for your media ethics classes:

1. Is stealth marketing ethical?

Plenty of ethicists think so¹, and it might not take long for a class to argue that a communicator's fidelity to truth – and perhaps the categorical imperative of treating people as ends to themselves – are violated when advertisers hide their hand and do not explicitly tell their targets that they are indeed targets.

2. But what if the targets don't care that they are targets?

This topic popped up in an extra-credit assignment I gave to Intro to Mass Communication students between discussions of advertising and public relations. Their task was to watch "Bike Hero," a "home video" posted to YouTube in November 2008 by a guy named Kevin who works a McDonald's fry machine in his hometown of Fort Wayne, Ind. The video shows Kevin playing the "Guitar Hero" game on his bicycle, pushing the buttons on the handlebar to follow the song's notes stuck to the pavement.

Shortly after the video became a viral sensation, Activision 'fessed up: There is no Kevin from Fort Wayne. The gamemaker hired a North Hollywood production company to make the "homemade" video. Even the handlebar lights that matched the game were faked. Students also read a short story about Activision's explanation² – not exactly an apology for lying – and answered a few questions.

More than four-fifths of the students said they did not feel "used" by the company's lie. A few who said they were not bothered by it assumed others would be bothered by it (third-person effects, anyone?) and some simply wondered why the company wouldn't take credit for such a cool video.

Students who thought the deception was acceptable fell into groups who:

- Were not fans of Guitar Hero and therefore didn't care one way or another.
- Thought it was OK because no harm was done.
- Thought it was OK because the goal of drawing attention worked, regardless of deception.
- Expect companies to try trickery regardless of whether it's right or wrong.
- Said it was OK because it was placed on YouTube for people to find, and not a conventional paid ad that was "shoved in the consumer's face."
- Thought the video was so cool that it didn't matter whether it was presented as a lie.
- Bought into the company's official explanation for not revealing the video's real source: "It's not meant to be deceptive. It's meant to be fun."

What about the third who said that they felt "used" by Activision's stealthy approach? A few cited moral concerns and that there was no ethical justification for lying. But many of the students who felt used also simply did not like the video.

There may not be statistical significance to this question (there's probably a good research topic in this for a later date), but it leads to a troubling conclusion: Students (and maybe others) seem to believe it's OK to deceive people if the deceptive approach has high aesthetic standards of "likeability." That explains the ad, and why starting on July 10, millions of people will flock to theaters to see Bruno, the latest movie from comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, whose technique of finding humor by provoking (usually) unsuspecting people makes Allen Funt's Candid Camera look like Mr. Roger's Neighborhood. Even then, Candid Camera was fooling one person at a time, not the audience.

Or maybe it's a generational thing, in which young people are hardened by the many attempts to grab their attention. One cannot imagine the makers of a product for senior adults using similar stealth tactics. We close with this quote, from the public relations major who loved the stealth approach: "The marketing staff should get props for thinking outside of the box." One can only assume that he was not referring to the Potter Box.

CS

¹ See, for example, Kelly D. Martin and N. Craig Smith, "Commercializing Social Interaction: The Ethics of Stealth Marketing," *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, 27,1 (Spring 2008, 45-56), or commentaries on a case study about in-text advertising presented in the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 22,4 (2007).

² See the story at <http://multiplayerblog.mtv.com/2008/11/20/real-story-behind-bike-hero/>

ONLINE: See the video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIMYWuGUZIM