

Ethical News

The newsletter of the AEJMC
Media Ethics Division

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Ethics and the shouting match

How can scholars help promote civility in media discourse?

David S. Allen
division head

A question has been bothering me for quite awhile: What role should media ethics scholars play in the creation of reasoned public discourse?

I'll warn you in advance that I don't have an answer to this question, but I believe it is a question that we need to consider.

I think it is fair to say that reasoned political discourse is not at a particularly high level these days. By this I don't mean that I'm tremendously concerned about Sen. Tom Daschle's recent complaint about Rush Limbaugh and other commentators promoting violence against him and his family. I think Daschle can take care of himself. I'm talking about the decline of political discourse at a much more basic, personal level and how to react to that decline.

In the past year, I've listened as a national radio host called a friend of mine a "communist" because he dared to write a newspaper column opposing the bombing of Afghanistan. The host went on to call on his listeners to begin a public campaign to have my friend, who teaches at a public university, fired for misleading the youth of America.

More recently, the chief executive officer of a public utility in Wisconsin was vilified for donating his own money to a group that opposes a war with Iraq. The group used his name and title on its Web site. Talk radio led the charge against him, labeling him as being

I've become frustrated as to what role media ethicists ought to play in the creation of a more reasoned, democratic discourse.

"anti-American." One radio personality even went so far as to suggest his ethnicity (apparently the man is of Lebanese descent) played a role in his "un-American" activity.

The attacks — a term which I believe is a fair characterization — all take the same form: Individuals have a right to express their opposition to war, but individuals who have some public standing need to be responsible for what it is they say. So, when people say something that is judged to be outside the mainstream, they need to be severely and publicly condemned. It is interesting to note that these political commentators do not feel the need to understand why someone might oppose a war with Iraq, or to help their audiences grapple with that issue, but rather their goal is to punish those who threaten the perceived status quo.

I raise these examples not because this is a particularly new development in political public life, nor solely out of my concern that dissenting voices are increasingly being marginalized. I raise them because I've become frustrated as to what role media ethicists ought to play in the creation of a more reasoned, democratic discourse. In short, I'm at a loss as to how to play

the modern game of democracy.

Others have figured out how to be a part of the debate. First Amendment scholars have long considered themselves to be part of the fight, criticizing legislation such as the Patriot Act and the Homeland Security Act because of their threats to personal freedom. But as I listen to the political discourse surrounding our foreign affairs, I think this is as much a battle over ethics as it is over the attainment of legal rights. But what role are we, as media ethicists, to play in that discussion?

The obvious traditional avenues, writing articles and providing broadcast commentary, are still open to us. And I have done some of that. But engaging the practitioners of this antidemocratic dialogue in a political debate is like entering the lion's lair. You play the game according to their rules, based on their questions, and with their agenda. Engaging media personalities in their own forums, if they even allow it, can do more damage than good. Few of us are as practiced at the game as the people who do it every day, especially when they have an agenda to defend. The old political saw "never get into an argument with someone who buys ink by the gallon" needs to be updated: Never get into a public discussion with anyone who only wants to use you to prove a point. Today's media world is not a world that values reasoned discourse on complex issues, but it does seem to value hyperbole, confrontation, and simplistic generalizations.

Political discourse in today's media world has been neatly divid-

Plagiarism topic
of plenary in K.C.

**AEJMC schedule
for MED on page 2**

Sandra Borden
vice chair/program head

The Media Ethics Division has plenty of programming to keep you busy in Kansas City this summer, including a mini-plenary on plagiarism that ties into the convention theme of "Ethics in Research and Teaching."

The mini-plenary will be from 1:30-3 p.m. Aug. 1. The session is co-sponsored by Advertising, Public Relations and Law.

In addition, MED is sponsoring nine panels and three refereed research paper sessions. The division also is participating in the scholar-to-scholar session from 1:30-3 p.m. July 31.

The program was set at AEJMC's Council of Divisions meeting Dec. 6-7 in Palo Alto.

Panelists and moderators have not been finalized. If you are interested, please e-mail me at sandra.borden@wmich.edu, or follow up with the appropriate contact listed for the session in which you are interested.

One last programming note: The Council of Divisions voted to rename division and interest group business meetings. The new name is "member meetings." The change is meant to underscore the fact that all members (not just officers) are encouraged to attend. So consider yourself invited to MED's member meeting at 8:30 p.m. July 31.

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See K.C., page 2

Ethical Briefing

Send items for this column to:
Kris Bunton, newsletter editor
kebunton@stthomas.edu

Professional ethics theme of MED's Mid-Winter meeting

The Media Ethics Division's mid-winter meeting, titled "Ethics Across the Professions," will be held from March 19 to 21, 2003, at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg.

Who: Decision-makers from business, medicine/health care, media, law, science, education, and other professions, plus "the rest of us."

What: Provocative, helpful explorations of dilemmas that cut across the professions.

Schedule:

◆ Keynote by Dr. Jeffrey Wigand, the tobacco-company whistleblower made famous in the movie, "The Insider," at 7 p.m. Wednesday, March 19.

◆ Panels 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday, March 20, on ethics across the professions;

◆ Panels and papers on Friday, March 21, on ethics in media/journalism.

Cost: All events are free and open to the public, including receptions and breaks, etc. No registration fees are charged, but pre-registration is necessary so we know how many to plan for and to order food.

Lodging: A block of rooms has been reserved at the Hampton Inn Downtown St. Petersburg. The nightly rate of \$139 plus tax includes breakfast.

Contact for program information:

Dr. Jay Black, Program for Ethics in Education and Community (PEEC), University of South Florida St. Petersburg, St. Petersburg, FL, 33701-5016. www1.stpt.usf.edu/peec

12th annual APPE meeting starts Feb. 27 in Charlotte

The 12th annual meeting of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics will be held Feb. 27 through March 2, 2003, at the Hilton Charlotte University Place in Charlotte, N.C. Dennis F. Thompson, the Alfred North Whitehead professor of political philosophy and director of the Center for Ethics and the Professions at Harvard University, will be the keynote speaker. The title of his address is "Restoring Distrust: The Ethics of Oversight."

More information can be found at:
<http://php.ucs.indiana.edu/~appe/home.html>.

Additional briefs on page 3

MED on the Web

http://jcomm.uoregon.edu/~tbivins/aejmc_ethics/home.html

Ethics missing in much media 'discourse'

Discourse, from page 1

ed into packages for us to consume. On one side are liberals and on the other side are conservatives. Mediacyzed political discourse plays off of those distinctions — perhaps it creates those distinctions — as a way of creating conflict not for the sake of helping us understand the world we live in, but for the purposes of grabbing and retaining our attention. The foolishness — and the destructiveness — of those labels was pointed out to me years ago by a wise justice of the Wisconsin Supreme Court. As a young reporter interviewing him about his upcoming retirement from the bench, I made the mistake of adopting political rhetoric and referred to him as a conservative. He noted his strong judicial record on the environment, along with his private leadership in environmental causes, and then asked me if that made him a liberal or a conservative? As I struggled to respond, he answered for me: Political labels don't help us understand the political world in which we

live, they just serve as a way to divide society. Stuart Ewen has described this same ethical problem very succinctly: "Until a sense of difference is balanced by a sense of commonality, a democratic public will be unattainable" (Stuart Ewen, *PR! A Social History of Spin*, New York: Basic Books (1996): p. 414).

Understanding that, however, hasn't helped me find an answer to my question. I teach my students how to critique and understand the political discourse that drives our world, but the likelihood of change seems remote. Whatever a citizen's political beliefs, I believe there is a responsibility to work to improve political discourse and to assist people in having a better understanding of the multitude of attitudes that exist about events. Perhaps the only way to do that is to teach people how political rhetoric limits their worldview. How we do that beyond the classroom, I'm not sure. I'd enjoy hearing your ideas.

David Allen, head of the Media Ethics Division, teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

MED schedule for AEJMC in Kansas City

Tuesday, July 29

◆ 8 a.m.-5 p.m. 20th Annual Media Ethics Teaching Workshop. A dinner open to all will be held in the evening to honor workshop founder Edmund Lambeth, who is retiring at the end of this school year. **Contact:** Bill Babcock, wababcock@csulb.edu.

Wednesday, July 30

◆ 8:15-9:45 a.m. Research paper session.
◆ 10-11:30 a.m. "Crash Prevention: Handling the Clash Between Market-Oriented Skills and Ethical Values in the Advertising and Public Relations Curriculum," co-sponsored by Advertising. **Contact:** Kristie Bunton, kebunton@stthomas.edu.

◆ 1:30-3 p.m. "Another Look at IRBs and Prior Restraint," co-sponsored with Law. **Contact:** MED liaison Stephanie Craft, CraftS@missouri.edu.

◆ 5-6:30 p.m. Research paper session.

Thursday, July 31

◆ 11:45 a.m.-1:15 p.m. "Teaching Law and Ethics Together: Feast or Famine?" co-sponsored by Law. **Contact:** Jack Breslin, jbreslin@iona.edu.

◆ 1:30-3 p.m. Scholar-to-scholar session.
◆ 3:15-4:45 p.m. "Virtual Reality and Communication Ethics," co-sponsored by Cultural and Critical Studies. **Contact:** Cliff Christians, cchrstns@uiuc.edu.

◆ 5-6:30 p.m. Research paper session.

◆ 8:30-10 p.m. Members meeting.

◆ 10:15 p.m. Executive Committee meeting.

Friday, Aug. 1

◆ 8:15-9:45 a.m. "Ethics Across the Professions," co-sponsored by the Council of Affiliates. **Contact:** Jay Black, black@bayflash.stpt.usf.edu.

◆ 1:30-3 p.m. Mini-plenary on plagiarism, co-sponsored by Advertising, Public Relations and Law. **Contact:** Sandra Borden.

◆ 5-6:30 p.m. Speaker to be announced (co-sponsored with Cultural and Critical Studies).

Saturday, Aug. 2

◆ 8:15-9:45 a.m. AEJMC training for incoming officers.

◆ 10-11:30 a.m. "Journalists and Whistleblowers: Thinking Through This Important Relationship." **Contact:** Lee Wilkins, WilkinsL@missouri.edu.

◆ 1:30-3 p.m. "After Enron, WorldCom, Xerox, etc: Perspectives on Newspaper Executives Who Also Take Stock Options, Bonuses & 'Consulting' Contracts," co-sponsored by Mass Communication and Society. **Contact:** Dane Claussen, dsclaussen@hotmail.com.

◆ 3:15-4:45 p.m. "Media Criticism: Who's Doing It, Who's Not Doing It, and Who's Listening," co-sponsored with Mass Communication and Society. **Contact:** MED liaison Beth Blanks Hindman, ehindman@wsu.edu.

Ethical Briefing

Send items for this column to:
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New Web site to focus on media accountability systems

A Web site is now dedicated to the press councils (PC) and other media accountability systems (M*A*S) that exist, or should exist, on the blue planet: www.presscouncils.org. It has just been set up, under the aegis of the Alliance of Independent Press Councils of Europe (AIPCE), by the British Press Complaints Commission.

The Web site has a double purpose: First, to offer all PCs on the planet an easy way to stay in contact and cooperate, if only by sharing information; and second, to offer everyone interested in media improvement (a.k.a. journalism ethics, quality control, social responsibility, etc.) a vast source of information.

A visit to the Web site will give you an idea of its present contents:

- ◆ a list of existing PCs (with full addresses)
- ◆ a list of over 100 codes of ethics
- ◆ a list of about 60 M*A*S
- ◆ a list of hundreds of books and links related to media ethics and accountability.

The site is yours to use and enrich. While the Web site's "Forum" is restricted to PCs and some authorized persons (see the "Questions & Help" section for how to register), all the rest of the Web site is open to all. Anyone may contribute to every section (corrections, additions, etc.) but, of course, some editing will be needed. Please send me the material you would like to see posted. Specifically, I would appreciate hearing from you about:

- ◆ news related to press ethics and M*A*S, like the creation of a new PC, or important press ethics issues (serious violations) in your region etc.).
- ◆ events planned in your part of the world that concern PCs and M*A*S (e.g. conferences, research projects etc.).
- ◆ codes of ethics other than those already posted.
- ◆ new M*A*S developed in your region that should be included in the posted list.
- ◆ books, reports being published, or Web sites being launched, that concern media ethics and M*A*S.

Lastly, I beg you to let me know what you dislike about this site (not including the technical aspects of it) and how you think it could be improved. No need to pull punches.

— Claude-Jean Bertrand
University of Paris

The final exam

'The real final exam is whether the ethical theory students learn in the classroom translates into the newsroom.'

Peggy J. Bowers
teaching chair

Most university and college campuses buzz at a frenetic pace at the end of each semester in the special hell of final exams. The library, once deserted on weekends, is jammed with bleary-eyed or caffeinated students making up for lost time, or squeezing too many projects into too few days. From the students' perspective, the source of their anxiety stems at least in part from the uncertainty that they will be able to perform "under the gun," to react to problems that require them to draw on a large body of knowledge under the pressure of a short amount of time. Life won't treat them any better, especially if they become media professionals.

That point was emphatically reiterated as my students and I made the pilgrimage to CNN recently. Amidst harried reporters and editors pushing to put stories on the air faster than anyone else, with an increasingly important economic deadline of greater ratings and profits, the age-old ethical questions haven't changed, and I wonder if what educators teach their students will prove useful in devising any answers. Educators have the challenge of making ethics meaningful in a contextually complex environment. The real final exam is whether the ethical theory students learn in the classroom translates into the newsroom. As one of CNN's senior professionals said, "the ethical dilemma is that we're human." I couldn't agree more.

Keeping our pedagogical goal in mind, how can we serve students better in their professional lives to come?

First, I would contend, expand their boundaries of what an ethical problem can be. Ethical dilemmas do not just appear in the universe; they arise when people find themselves caught between the tensions of competing moral complexities, visible only to the morally sensitive eye. In such a place, people struggle to make sense of their whole lives, not merely the individual actions within them.

Thus, the second quality of a truly relevant moral education is to instill contextual sensibilities. If moral struggles are born of competing values, and genuinely satisfying resolution results from an evaluative process within the environment of a community, only an ability to be sensitive to the complexities of situation

To embrace the idea that the real ethical dilemma is humanness is not to suggest that we should somehow compensate for it, or eviscerate it. Rather, a professional ethics education should strive to provide the means for incorporating human identity into a professional one.

and the Other will transform those ideals into meaningful action. The CNN journalist who correctly identified the source of our ethical perplexity as humanness perhaps in part lamented that as an impediment to truly professional journalistic practice. The longing to remove our humanity from our professional identities because it's more pristine and easier, is often reflected in ethical theory.

Yet the third and pivotal characteristic of a professionally responsive moral education is to put the human being into journalistic practice. People, journalists included, search for some authentic expression of self. Tearing that apart from professional action leads only to competing identities, moral frustration, and incommensurable ethical conflict. To embrace the idea that the real ethical dilemma is humanness is not to suggest that we should somehow compensate for it, or eviscerate it. Rather, a professional ethics education should strive to provide the means for incorporating human identity into a professional one.

Doing that will require vision and ethical sensitivity, more than logical problem solving skills. Students must be equipped for life, not just work, for in the end they will have to comprehend and answer for, not a particular story or interview, but a whole existence. Their ability to do that will be the measure of what we have taught them.

Peggy J. Bowers teaches media ethics at Clemson University in South Carolina.

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

WAR stories

Jack Breslin professional freedom & responsibility chair

Even without a qualitative study, we can assume that many media ethics instructors use some form of the case-study method in their undergraduate classes.

Students often find that realistic examples of ethical dilemmas help them to apply ethical principles and philosophies to the “real” media world. And many students enjoy debating the ethical decisions involved in these narratives, whether hypothetical or true.

Unfortunately, the day’s news frequently provides factual examples of questionable behavior by media practitioners. For example, as Barbara Nachman of the *Journal News* mentions in her guest column, a veteran sports columnist at her newspaper was fired recently after admitting to plagiarizing a feature from the *Kansas City Star*.

Using examples of ethical dilemmas from the immediate area poses the remote danger of someone in the class knowing or even being related to the practitioner in question. One of your students might later intern or work at the media outlet, and unintentionally present an inaccurate interpretation of your ethical opinion. That misunderstanding could unleash a tenure-threatening backlash from the outlet’s management.

What about delving into one’s own media experience to provide “real world” case studies or “war stories” of adventures in journalism and public relations, as I have often done? From student evaluations and conversations, I find that the majority of students appreciate my examples from four years of news-

paper reporting and nearly a decade of entertainment publicity at Fox and NBC.

As one student wrote after a summer session ethics class at the University of Minnesota, “Breslin’s history/background helped a lot with applying what we’re learning in class to real-life situations.” Or another, who wrote, “I enjoyed his interesting stories and real-life experiences. It’s nice to know as I leave this school that there are still instructors that enforce real-life experiences in addition to ‘book work.’” Others were not so positive, finding my examples repetitive, boring, and egoistical, as one student who described my “narcissistic soap box.”

OK, so I like to tell stories, and I repeat myself. But as I tell my students during the first class, I share these memories as examples of what happens out in the “real world” of media competition. My purpose is to challenge them, not to brag about my career. After all, if I could do it, so can they, I encourage them.

In that decade of entertainment PR, I never once heard the word “ethics” used, nor was there ever a discussion of the ethical implications of our actions. That’s not to say that I did not work with some extremely moral individuals. But

under the constant pressure of corporate promotion and network competition, ethics was not a prime consideration in our publicity strategies.

Some of my newspapers’ editors provided many colorful examples of lapses in ethical judgment. An editor of a small weekly could not

understand my concern when they killed my free-lance submission after the featured business, a haunted hayride, refused to buy an advertisement. That was the only story they declined in my two years of work.

During my days at a mid-sized daily, an editor sent me over to the local Catholic high school to borrow a yearbook photograph of a drunken-driving accident fatality.

He had assured me that the family had granted permission. Calling the family, the principal learned that no such permission had been given. She threw me out with words you would never expect from a nun. His response: “Yeah, I lied, but I thought you could charm it out of her.”

Those examples expose the questionable ethics of others. But what about when the instructor admits to an obvious error in ethical judgment?

For example, while covering the production of Fox’s “COPS” in Las

Tales of ethical triumphs and lapses can both enhance and hinder the learning process

Vegas, I was supervising a free-lance photographer doing publicity stills of the featured police officers. Since it was a slow Saturday night, there was surprisingly little “action” to photograph. So we decided to pose an officer restraining a handcuffed “suspect.” When we couldn’t find a willing participant in the curious crowd, I draped myself over the hood of the squad car, while turning my head away from the camera lens. Having gotten our quota of usable shots, we flew back to Los Angeles.

Only later did I realize my ethical ignorance regarding such a posed shot. A friend, who was a reporter at a mid-market TV station, called to say there was a full-page spread on “COPS” in the local newspaper. As she described the published photographs, I jokingly asked her if she recognized anyone, especially the handcuffed “suspect.” “How could you!” she exclaimed. “That’s complete bull----!”

So what impression does one make on students in admitting ethical imperfections? Do you destroy any teaching credibility? Are you preaching, “Do as I say, don’t do as I do?” Or are you providing realistic examples illustrating that ethical concerns can sometimes fall by the wayside under the pressure of one’s work?

By teaching media ethics, we can only explain the values, the principles, the philosophies, the ethical decision-making tools — and the case studies. It’s up to our students to decide their own ethics. They must decide what ethical road to follow, good or bad, whether taught to them by their parents, their peers, their bosses — or their media ethics professor.

Jack Breslin teaches media ethics and law at Iona College in New Rochelle, N.Y.

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Pressure from sources — and editors — can lead to ethical dilemmas

Barbara Nachman
The Journal News

As I sat down to write about the ethical decisions I've wrestled with over the years as a newspaper reporter, I learned that a long-time colleague had just resigned after plagiarizing at least one story from another newspaper.

The newsroom was abuzz for days, as it always is when a reporter is dismissed or resigns. But this time, it was different. While everyone speculated about the reasons he strayed down the path to professional suicide, not a single reporter or editor criticized the decision to let him go.

If newspaper ethics could be compared to traffic violations, plagiarism would be speeding through a red light at a busy intersection with your horn blaring and a hugely pregnant woman by your side. It's a self-destructive act, and these days with easy Internet access to publications, getting caught is more likely than ever. But that's not the main reason we don't steal other people's work. What's more important is that plagiarism breaks the most fundamental journalistic contract, the trust between reader and writer.

Maybe I'm naive, but I don't think most reporters ever consider plagiarizing. Still, not a week goes by that we're not confronted with other ethical decisions.

Take my first day on the job, 17 years ago. The phone rang, and it was the friendly folks at the Orient Express informing me of an exotic press trip being organized. Should

they sign me up? Well, no. The policy of my newspaper is not to take press junkets. Why? Because after being jetted and feted, how could I possibly maintain objectivity? And even if I could, the appearance of impropriety would taint anything I wrote.

And so during the years I spent as a travel writer, I passed up a "trip to nowhere" on the Concorde, and more jaunts to the world's ritziest locales than I wish to remember. It also meant giving up the opportunity to write about those fabulous places since my newspaper didn't have the money to send me to Katmandu, or even Kalamazoo.

Still, I agree with the policy. But there is one fact that muddied these ethical waters. At the time I was the travel writer, freelancers who sold us stories were not held to the same ethical standard.

What's that about?

I think it's about realizing that ethical absolutism is an impossibility in an arena as vibrant and multi-dimensional as newspaper. I no longer write about travel. Now I'm a general assignment feature writer. I often cover fashion and beauty, and not a week goes by that I don't receive a gift from some company that hopes I'll write a glowing review about its "amazing" new product that could turn Barbra Streisand into

Heidi Klum. In the newsroom, we call it graft.

I like to think I can't be bought in this way. Still, I donate the wrinkle removers, hair growers, and nail strengtheners to a charity sale we hold several times a year.

I don't find it difficult to pass up these goodies. But there was a time that I was sore-

ly tempted to break an ethical code.

Ten years ago, I was sent to Washington, D.C., to write about the three days of festivities surrounding the inauguration of our 42nd president. I flew to the nation's capital two days before inauguration day, hooked up with a photographer, and spent the hours at the Festival on the Mall interviewing scores of people.

I returned to my hotel room and was putting the finishing touches on my story when my editor phoned.

Did I interview any people from our readership area, she wanted to know.

No, I didn't meet anyone from the New York Metropolitan area. Well, you have to find someone local for your story, she barked.

It was 8 p.m. The festival was long over. I called other reporters from my newspaper who were covering the Clinton inauguration, but everyone they knew was arriving the next day.

Had my editor mentioned this little matter before I left on the assignment, I could have worked the phones until I found someone planning to attend the festival, but now, with my deadline only minutes away, it was an impossibility.

I glanced at my notebook filled with dozens of quotes. That's when I noticed how many people I interviewed from Mount Vernon...Mount Vernon, Va., of course, not Mount Vernon, N.Y., which is in our circulation area. And come to think of it, most of the people never bothered to mention Virginia. It was simply understood.

That's when I realized with one tap of the delete button on my laptop, I could give the editor what she wanted.

What would you have done?

Barbara Nachman is a journalist at The Journal News, a suburban Gannett newspaper located in White Plains, N.Y., that covers Westchester, Rockland, and Putnam counties just north of New York City.

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

WAR
stories

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