

# Ethical News

The newsletter of the AEJMC  
Media Ethics Division

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- Visit the MED home page at [http://jcomm.uoregon.edu/~tbivins/aejmc\\_ethics/index.html](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](mailto:stlee@ilstu.edu)

## Hard choices, strong program for Chicago '08

Patrick Lee Plaisance  
Vice head/Programming chair

The 30-odd programming chairs of the various AEJMC divisions, interest groups & commissions gathered in St. Louis Nov. 30-Dec. 2, where the (infamous) 'chip auction' took place to build the program for the Chicago conference in August. I'll spare you the details of the frenetic deal-making and horse-trading among all of us that occurred over the two weeks beforehand, as we all jockeyed to put together a strong program based largely on co-sponsorship agreements. Suffice it to say that we all



had to make some hard choices on which joint panels to pursue and how to balance those with getting decent time slots for our research paper presentations. Media Ethics Division members stepped up to the plate this fall, proposing a dozen joint-panel ideas. Across all of the divisions and interest groups, we had

more than 250 proposed joint panels to choose from, and fewer than half that number of panel times on the scheduling grid for Chicago. We certainly didn't get everything that we wanted (when does anyone?), but we got much of it. I was grateful to have Liz Skewes of Colorado, our division head, and Jack Breslin of Iona, our research chair, on hand at the St. Louis meetings to help me seal deals.

I am excited about the resulting program for Chicago, which features a solid range of topics in teaching, research and practice that will draw good interest. In some cases, the lineup reflects longstanding partnerships with

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## A long, hard look to help map AEJMC's future

Liz A. Skewes  
Division head

Over the next several months – and leading up to the annual convention in Chicago – we're being asked to help with the long-term planning for AEJMC.

Most members have already heard something about the strategic planning that's going on, and some may be very involved in the planning process. But now AEJMC's leaders are asking each of the divisions and interest groups to pitch in, too, by taking a long, hard look at their disciplines.

For us, that means doing an assessment of the field of media ethics. What are the bench-

marks for the discipline? Where are the new opportunities in terms of developing media ethics? What are the challenges? And what lessons from the past – as we move forward as a division and a discipline – should we be careful not to forget?

We'll be talking about this throughout the year, starting at the midwinter meeting in San Antonio, Texas, being held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics.

From that, we're planning to post a report and discussion thread on the Media Ethics Division web page, so that each of you can take a look at what we come up with in those preliminary discussions in February and can offer your comments and ideas. Your participation in this will be essential if we're going

to come up with a report that truly reflects the state of media ethics today and helps chart a path for the coming decades. Your suggestions will become part of a second draft of the report, which we'll get ready and post to the website before the annual convention in Chicago, and we'll take some time at our business meeting in Chicago to get feedback from you on that draft. The goal is to ship a final "State of Media Ethics" report to AEJMC leaders before classes start up next fall.

Keep an eye out for more pieces about the study in future issues of the newsletter, and if you've got ideas you'd like to share before the discussion thread is posted, please feel free to e-mail me at [elizabeth.skewes@colorado.edu](mailto:elizabeth.skewes@colorado.edu).

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other groups on topics of continuing interest. In others, we're running panels with groups that we haven't worked with in recent years, opening exciting new possibilities. This also will be the second year that we are committing time and resources to co-sponsor the "Hot Topics" panel with Small Programs Interest Group. We'll set the topic in late spring. Recall the crowd-pleasing "Hot Topics" panel on the Virginia Tech shooting coverage in D.C. last year. The Division should consider whether this might be a permanent feature of MED programming; SPIG certainly is interested in having a standing relationship with us to co-sponsor the "Hot Topics" panel on a regular basis.

We have four opportunities to present research papers, including a poster session, same as in previous years. Note that AEJMC begins on a Wednesday this coming year (pre-conference stuff on Tuesday!), which likely means one more hotel night than usual for many of us.

## MED lineup for Chicago

For those of you whose panels have been approved, I will need you to firm up commitments from the panelists you proposed that you still would like to see in Chicago, but also to consider how our co-sponsors might be accommodated if they are not already. I will be happy to help in this. **THE DEADLINE FOR FINAL COPY FOR PANELS IS MARCH 14.**

Here is the Media Ethics Division lineup for Chicago:

### TUESDAY, 5 AUGUST:

- MED Pre-convention Teaching Workshop, 1-6.

### WEDNESDAY, 6 AUGUST:

- MED Research Paper Panel, 8:15 a.m.
- Anonymity & Identity in the News. PF&R panel co-sponsored with Community Journalism Interest Group, 10 a.m.
- Advocacy Journalism or Public Relations? (Re)Defining the Values of News. PF&R panel co-sponsored with Newspaper Division, 11:45 a.m.
- MED Research Paper

Panel, 1:30 p.m.

### THURSDAY, 7 AUGUST:

- Seeing the Truth: Searching for Ethics in Visual Media. Research panel co-sponsored with Visual Communication Division, 8:15 a.m.
  - 'Hot Topics' (TBD). PF&R panel co-sponsored with Small Programs Interest Group, 11:45 a.m. [Recall our highly successful 'Hot Topics' panel in D.C. that focused on Virginia Tech shooting coverage; this may well become a standing co-sponsoring relationship with SPIG if future MED leadership is amenable to committing a half-chip each year.]
  - MED Scholar-to-Scholar research presentation, 1:30 p.m.
  - Implications of the Single-Ownership Trend in News Media. PF&R panel co-sponsored by Newspaper Division, 3:15 p.m.
  - MED Members' Meeting, 6:45 p.m.
- ### FRIDAY, 8 AUGUST:
- Are We Lost in Cyberspace?

Editing, Ethics & End-Users of Online Journalism. PF&R panel co-sponsored with Law & Policy Division, 8:15 a.m.

- Field Censorship During War-time. Research panel co-sponsored with History Division, 3:30 p.m.
- Opinion Writing in the Age of Blogs: Teaching Responsibility to Balance Rights in the Student Press and Beyond. Teaching panel co-sponsored with Small Programs Interest Group, 5:15 p.m.

### SATURDAY, 9 AUGUST:

- MED Research Paper Panel, 8:15 a.m.
- The Ethics of Framing Science. PF&R panel co-sponsored with Science Communication Interest Group, 10 a.m.
- MED Research Paper Panel, 1:30 p.m.
- Conflict Resolution & Ethics in the PR Classroom: What Matters in Teaching Today [Title likely to be refined]. Teaching panel co-sponsored with Public Relations Division, 3:15 p.m.

**Deadline for final copy for panels: March 14, 2008**

## The Outing of Jim West: An online case study

### SPOKANE



### WEST TIED

For a quarter century, Spokane's mayor has trust – as a sheriff's deputy and powerful politician, relationships with boys. One man claims in a... West molested him in... was a boy and West w...

In addition, an investigation by The Spokesman-Review months after leaving the state Legislature, West had... mayor's office to entice an... once young men...

Each day reporters and editors at news organizations have to make ethical decisions. Now your students can get an up-close look at how difficult that decision-making is with a new free, online case study made for ethics and journalism classes. It's entitled: The Outing of Mayor Jim West. Back in 2005 the editors and reporters at the *Spokane Spokesman-Review* believed that West, then the mayor of Spokane, although publicly against gay rights, was trolling for young men on the Internet. Editors and reporters, after deliberation, decided to hire a computer forensic expert to pose as a 17-year-old boy. That decision eventually led the mayor and the fictitious young man to set up a face-to-face meeting.

That act would solidify the evidence that he was trolling for young men, and the Spokane paper broke a series of stories.

After the stories broke, the *Spokesman-Review* was accused of unethical behavior because it used the undercover forensic agent. Now your students after reviewing the evidence and opinions from both sides, will, as the journalists at the *Spokesman-Review* did, have to make their own decisions. Did the paper act ethically? Of course, there is no pat answer and that's what makes this online assignment so challenging. The case study, produced by Leonard Witt, the Robert D. Fowler Distinguished Chair in Communication at Kennebec State University, can be found via a link at his [www.PJNet.org](http://www.PJNet.org) website.

# When being ethical bites you back

Chris Roberts  
Professional Freedom  
& Responsibility Chair

Public relations majors at my university must take an outside writing class, which explains why PR students filled eight of the 10 spots in the sophomore-level reporting course I taught last summer. They leave with improved thinking and writing skills, of course, as well as having felt the heat of deadline.

Perhaps more importantly, those PR majors discover how hard their chosen field can make it to be a responsible journalist.

They learn how difficult it is to craft a news story when the PR person doesn't return calls or provide access to the experts they need. They struggle with PR folks who only take written questions in advance, removing the chance for follow-up questions asked in real time. They learn how they can be spun when they haven't done the research needed to discover facts and opinion different from the PR person's message. In short, they see how their journalistic goal of finding the lower-case "T" is foiled, or at least made more difficult, when they're on the receiving end of what they learn in their PR classes.

One of the ethical rules we discuss in reporting class is the

**One of the ethical rules we discuss in reporting class is the reminder that journalists should give the subjects of a news story the opportunity to comment before publication**

reminder that journalists should give the subjects of a news story the opportunity to comment before publication. Students don't like to do it because confrontation is uncomfortable, but I remind them that ethics demands that right of reply.

But now that ethical action is being used against journalists who dig up news you'd never see proffered in a government news release. It's happened in two of the highest-profile stories of the year.

On Dec. 5, *New York Times* reporter Mark Mazzetti told the Central Intelligence Agency it planned to publish a story saying the agency destroyed videotapes that documented interrogation of al-Qaeda captives. Mazzetti told the CIA that the story would run Dec. 7, giving the agency a day to comment.

The CIA's response: On Dec. 6, Director Mike Hayden sent a statement to CIA employees to tell them "the press has learned" the agency destroyed tapes. The result: The

Associated Press broke the story, not *The Times*.

In an e-mail to me, *Times*' Deputy Washington Bureau Chief Douglas Jehl said Hayden and the CIA "were within their rights to alert employees" that the story would be coming.

"But I did find it unusual," he wrote, "that other news organizations managed to obtain copies of General Hayden's internal statement in advance of our publication of what the C.I.A.

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## An ethical no man's land?

Bastiaan Vanacker  
Teaching Chair

Do our students look at the Internet in a different light than we do? A couple of instances in my media ethic class this semester made me think that this might indeed be the case.

At one point, I was discussing Perez Hilton's posting of a young girl's Youtube videos on his popular Website. In the clips, a somewhat awkward looking young girl talking in an accent could be seen sitting in her bedroom, discussing the lives of the popular culture icons (Britney, Lindsey,...) of our times, in one clip she was performing a song herself. The clips were somewhat bizarre and comical, even though they were not intended to be so.

Hilton recognized the clips' comedic potential and put them on his site with a caption that mocked the girl. Visitors left comments that ridiculed the young virtual pamphleteer in the cruelest of ways, while other comments offered the girl comfort and support. Soon after this,



of planet Youtube and give them national prominence on a celebrity gossip site, possibly emotionally scarring the young girl in the process.

Much to my surprise, the students in my class took a tough-love approach, arguing that the girl should have been more careful and that these issues are to be expected when one posts content on the Web. Others blamed the parents for not monitoring their daughter's ventures into Web

the girl pulled her videos from Youtube. I asked my students whether they thought it was appropriate for Hilton to take these videos that were doomed to flounder in the obscure corners

2.0 more closely. Few of them discussed the behavior of Perez Hilton directly, as they seemed to assume that celebrity and

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## Lessons for PR majors

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clearly recognized would be an explosive story.”

Jehl also said he found parallels to what happened in April to *The Washington Post*, after it gave the U.S. Army six days to answer questions before publishing a series on conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The Army used that time to brief hand-picked news outlets about how it’s solving a problem it never acknowledged it had, and embargoed coverage to appear just as *The Post’s* stories appeared.

In a Feb. 24 *Post* story about the incident, *Post* reporter Dana Priest said she told an Army

public affairs officer: “Do you think I’m going to be willing next time to give you [the Army] that much time to respond, if you’re going to turn around and tell my competitors?”

In both cases, journalists discovered news that the government agencies clearly were not likely to reveal on their own. In both cases, journalists did the right thing by seeking comment from agencies. And in both cases, the agencies used the journalists’ ethical actions to seek to control stories that had not yet been published.

As one PR student told me toward the end of the semester: “Now I appreciate what reporters do. This is *so hard*.”

even tag this as an ethical issue. When I asked the groups to share their thoughts with the class, both groups who had been assigned this case study merely discussed it in terms of newsworthiness; whether or not this information was important information.

Perhaps I had not made it clear enough that I wanted them to focus on the newsgathering methods used in this story as well, but I also suspect that our students have somewhat of a blind spot for these online issues. When I prodded them to share their thoughts about whether or not it was fair towards Giuliani’s daughter to use this information, I got similar answers as I had received in the Hilton case: She should have known better when she posted this information and one should consider everything one posts on the Internet as public and fair game.

In reaction papers I received about inaccurate information being posted on the Internet or questionable online information gathering techniques being employed by advertisers, I saw the

### A CASE STUDY

The facts of *The Washington Post*/Army incident in April would make useful case study in a media ethics class, especially one that includes both journalism and public relations students.

#### Background

Visit [www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/test\\_post.php](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/test_post.php), which includes a link to *The Washington Post’s* coverage of Army PR efforts.

#### Some conversation starters:

- Do journalists always need comment from the target of a story before publication? If so, how much time should be given?
- Can journalists require that targets not discuss the story

with others in exchange for providing the target time to properly respond. (Could this be called a “reverse embargo?”)

- Do you think the Army public affairs office was ethical in its actions? What would you have done differently?
- What would you do if you were part of a news organization the Army called? Would you have attended the press briefing? Agreed to the embargo? Called *The Post* for comment on its yet-unpublished story?
- Try on Rawls’ Veil of Ignorance and work through the situation. How might your actions be different?

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scandal blogs operate in an ethical vacuum.

This is not the only example of my students’ tough love approach to the Internet. During an in-class exercise I asked two groups to analyze the case in which Slate.com had outed the 17-year-old daughter of presidential hopeful Rudy Giuliani as a Barack Obama supporter. The author of the piece was a student at Harvard College and had been able to visit Giuliani’s daughter’s Facebook profile that was available to all users of the Harvard or Trinity School networks. On this profile, Giuliani’s daughter had identified herself as belonging to a Facebook group supporting Obama.

I had expected students to focus on the ethics of gathering this information a minor had posted for social networking purposes and using it for a news story. I had not expected students to come down on one particular side of this issue, but I was surprised to see that they did not

same pattern emerge. For a lot (but certainly not all) of the ethical issues raised by the Internet, students seem to lay the blame with those who are being victimized, misled and duped, rather than with those actually doing the misleading and duping. This surprised me because this was not representative for my students’ ethical thinking in other parts of the course, when they generally displayed a high level of empathy with victims.

If my experiences this semester are indicative for a wider trend among our students (which may very well not be the case), then I think we are dealing with a generation of students that looks at the Internet as somewhat of an ethical no man’s land that one enters at one’s own risk. This makes for rather dull ethical analyses as it seems to amount to a de facto absolution of many ethical transgressors, because the victim should have known better. Life on the Internet is nasty and brutish, for these students, and no social contract to be seen. Maybe this is a healthy dose of cynicism on the part of my students who

were all very young when the Internet started to boom and may have been raised by parents more worried about the dangers than excited about the potential of this new medium.

As media instructors, we need to try to get a better understanding of how our students look at the Internet. A lot of the thinking about the Internet has been guided by the metaphors employed to describe it. Most of us were already at or out of the University when the Internet came around and we embraced it as the new public forum, the free market place of ideas, a cyberdemocracy and all those other lofty descriptions we employed to capture the true meaning of Web 1.0. This may have steered our ethical thinking about this medium, but we should realize that the metaphors that guide our students’ ethical thinking about the Web are not the same as ours. Finding out what they are is, I believe, the key for media ethics instructors to have a more rewarding pedagogical experience when tackling online ethics.