

# Media Ethics Division-AEJMC

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## Ideas R Us

Do you have a teaching idea or question you'd like to see in the Newsletter or on the website? Would you like to "poll" MED members on some aspect of teaching? Send your ideas to our Teaching Chair and she'll try to pursue them in future issues. Examples might include: teaching ethics to large classes, using the Socratic method in teaching ethics, tips for grading and assessment in ethics education and more. What's "trending" in your brain? Contact Jan Leach at [jleach1@kent.edu](mailto:jleach1@kent.edu) or phone 330-672-4289.

## MASTHEAD

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## Ethical News: Winter 2012 • Volume 16, No. 2

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## Boosting Submissions (and interest) in MED

by **Bastiaan Vanacker, Division Head**

When I started my tenure as MED Research Chair in the fall of 2010, I wrote an article for this newsletter discussing the dwindling number of research papers we had received that year. Only 36 scholars had sent us a paper for review, a notable drop from the year before. The following year we had 48 submissions and we breathed a sigh of relief. This year, however, we received an embarrassingly low 23 manuscripts at a time when overall submissions to AEJMC were up.



True, these numbers are cyclical to a degree and we cannot evaluate the health of our division solely by a parameter as volatile as submission numbers. I am hopeful that the [efforts of our research chair](#) Jenn Mackey and our collective effort to prod people into submitting to our division will result in a higher number of articles received this coming April. At the same time, we cannot be blind to the fact that in the past five years there has been a steady decline in the number of papers sent to our division and that we have not been very successful in attracting new scholarship.

Despite the Carol Burnett Award and extra graduate student travel funds generously contributed by Tom Cooper, Wendy Wyatt, Ed Wasserman, Cliff Christians, and Stephen Ward, we have, with few exceptions, not been able to convince graduate students to submit their research to our division or become otherwise involved with MED. This could mean that there are fewer media ethics scholars in the pipeline and fewer graduate students who consider themselves media ethicists.

Last Fall, I was contacted by Randal Beam from the University of Washington who was chairing a search committee for a media ethics scholar at the time and wondered why there were so few media ethicists out there. In a recent follow-up email (shared here with permission) he wrote:

*"Our search was, perhaps, a bit unusual. Ethics was our central focus. We wanted to find a scholar and teacher, at the assistant-professor level, who was studying journalism or communication ethics and values in this digital-media age... In our pool of candidates, we had many excellent communication scholars and teachers. And we had candidates who currently were teaching ethics. But we didn't find a huge number of applicants whose scholarship focused on ethics. I'm not sure why."*

I am not sure either, but it does concern me. So I sent a mass email to my 12 MED Division Chair predecessors and asked for their input. Are we becoming less prominent? Are fewer graduate students interested in media ethics than a decade ago? If yes, how can we change the tide? Most of them replied (an 80% response rate!) with very thoughtful and cogent points, which are excerpted [elsewhere in this newsletter](#). Please take a minute to read their insights as they serve as a great start to a necessary conversation. Some thought the decline in paper submissions is a cyclical phenomenon, others argued we may be facing a more fundamental identity crisis, but everyone participated in a constructive exchange of ideas about who we are and what we can do better.

Regardless of our paper submission numbers this April, we can only benefit from a division-wide round of self-reflection about the status of our division. As MED leadership, we will try to facilitate this debate and use the insights it generates as we go about our business.

One prevailing point underlying the various responses I received was that MED may be intimidating to submit to. It is not entirely clear what type of research we are looking for, what our standards for review are, and what methodologies we welcome. Shannon Bowen put it sharply as she wrote: "I hear rumors that MED is full of stuffy old codgers talking endlessly about Aristotle – a real disincentive to those who are interested in ethics but know little about philosophy."

Those spreading such rumors must not have attended our socials the last three years, but the criticism stings anyway. Do we merely have an image problem or are we not inclusive enough? David Allen suggests the latter in observing that there is a lot of scholarship produced by non-media ethics scholars who stop short of addressing the ethical questions raised by their own scholarship. Allen suggests that "we haven't succeeded in making media ethics central to all media studies" and that instead we have been "trying to find ways to partition it off from media studies."

Many suggested that we could set up mentoring programs for graduate students, or for anyone else interested in submitting to our division for that matter, introducing them to the ways of doing media ethics research. Kevin Stoker (Vice Chair) and I were very close to securing a research panel at AEJMC devoted to this topic, but the chips did not fall in the right place this year. Kevin is committed to make this happen in 2014. Ultimately, we should work towards creating a document or research guide for those who are interested in doing media ethics research but fear doing so because they are unfamiliar with the categorical imperative.

Within the MED leadership, we will continue to brainstorm on how to incorporate your ideas into our planning decisions and hope to present more proposals in the future. In the meantime, I will try to keep this discussion going through our listserv and through other communication

channels. Please do not hesitate to send any thoughts or comments to [bvanacker@luc.edu](mailto:bvanacker@luc.edu).

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## Send Your Papers to the Media Ethics Division!

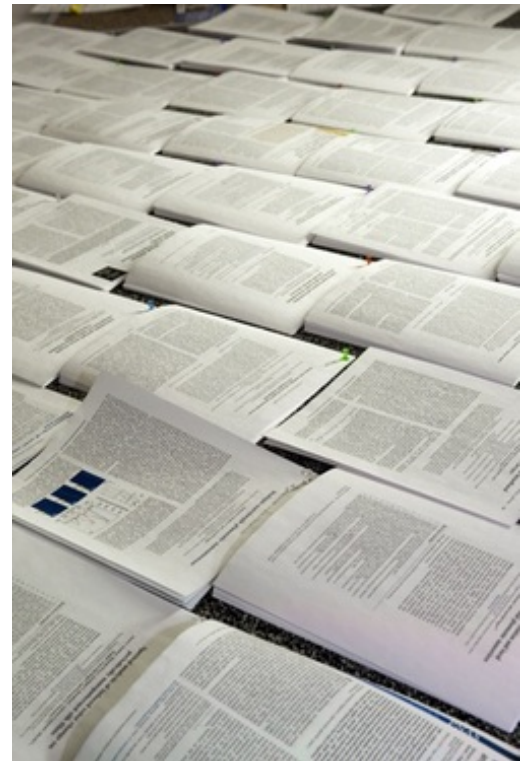
by **Jenn Burleson Macakay**  
Research Chair

The Media Ethics Division needs your research papers. We need your graduate students' papers. We need the best ethics work in our field. It's time for us to unleash some extra enthusiasm into the Media Ethics Division. Last year, our submission numbers were frightfully low. We're taking a few steps to try to increase everyone's interest in submitting to the division this year.

We have issued a special call, revamped our regular division call, and we are offering some extra funding for graduate student travel. Please send us your papers and encourage your students to send papers to MED. This year's special call is a bit different from what we have tried in recent years. We have issued a call for papers pertaining to entertainment ethics. The world of entertainment offers an abundance of research possibilities, ranging from the ethics of music and film to ethical issues in the world of video games. This is an important area that has implications for the entire society. Why shouldn't we encourage that work in our own division?

The decision to make the special call was prompted partly from a concern that our division may be viewed to outsiders as a closed society, which is populated by strong, normative-based research in the fields of public relations and journalism. It's always wonderful to see that work and I look forward to seeing more of those papers in Washington D.C., but I hope that we can also get the attention of those ethics scholars who are doing important ethics research in other areas of mass media and communication – those people who could be submitting their work to our division, but send it to other divisions instead. In short, I want to see this division grow.

We decided to revamp our regularly posted division call for papers to get the attention of people who may be less familiar with our division. This new call announces that we seek



papers that cover a wide range of ethical issues such as journalism, entertainment, public relations, and advertising. The call also explains that we welcome submissions from a variety of methodological approaches including rhetorical and theory-building work, surveys, experiments, interviews, or other data-collection methods. Finally, it suggests that we accept a variety of theoretical frameworks including normative and descriptive theories, which draw on communication, philosophy, sociology, psychology, or other fields.

Through the generous donations of several members, the division also will be offering travel stipends for top graduate student submissions. For many years we have worked with the University of Hawaii to offer the Carol Burnett award for a top graduate student paper. This year we will offer small travel stipends to other top graduate students. The exact amount of the stipends has not been determined yet. Donations allowed the division to make a similar offer to graduate students last year. However, we had very few students who chose to submit to the division. We need to bump those numbers up this year.

Please, send us to work and encourage others to submit papers to us as well. If you have graduate students, let them know about us. We want our division to be the go-to place for all the best ethics research in our fields. I look forward to seeing you in Washington, D.C.

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## MED Chairs Dialogue

*As part of an effort to arrest a decline in submissions to MED, Bastiaan Vanacker contacted his predecessors as Division Chair to seek their ideas on how to increase submissions and attract new scholars to the discipline. The responses have been excerpted here for the benefit of all members.*

### **Ginny Whitehouse**

We as a division perhaps need a clearer explanation of what ethics research should look like. What kind of quantitative models might work best? What qualitative methodology? What frameworks are we really looking for? Do we include cultural critical, and if we do, how do we train reviewers to evaluate something other than a social science method?

### **Margaret Patterson**

I wonder if we should try some mentoring process. Could we hold a pre-convention (or some other time) workshop in Washington for those who have an idea for a media ethics paper but need some guidance? Perhaps we could ask them to send an abstract of the idea and use it to assign them to a senior scholar who would be willing to help them.

### **Bill Babcock**

During the first years of MED, the division quickly became one of AEJMC's very largest divisions, and the research paper submissions were larger than were those of most other divisions. That MED no longer is overwhelmingly popular is, I think, more of a cyclical issue than anything else. That said, there are a variety of things we all might do to affect this cycle.

Perhaps we might think about having a portion of our annual pre-convention teach workshop focus on generation of research ideas. Might we also have as a part of our business meeting a discussion of research?

We might think of how we can work with other divisions to have special ethics sessions as a part of a collaborative move. Say newspaper ethics, magazine ethics, popular culture ethics, etc. In this way MED not only would be seen as a good team player, but it at the same time could generate interest in members of other divisions.

### **David Allen**



I tend to see ethics questions embedded in all media practice and scholarship. I've always thought we needed to do more to bring to the forefront those ethical issues, not only in the methods that are used, but in the findings that those methods produce. For example, when I read media framing studies, I'm struck by the number of ethical questions that go unaddressed. My friends who do these studies don't see that as their job even though they often do find my observations interesting. However, those topics generally go unaddressed.

I guess I'm trying to suggest that we haven't succeeded in making media ethics central to all media studies, but rather we seem to be trying to find ways to partition it off from media studies. I know that is a generalization and that there are people who cross that divide, but I don't think it happens enough. And that would be one of the reasons why we keep seeing the same people over and over.

When I was division chair, I was trying to imagine ways to cross that divide. One of the ways was trying to figure out special paper topic calls that would draw in people from other divisions (like ethics and media framing or something). I never managed to pull it off, however. As I recall, the division has a rather large membership, but we just don't get many paper submissions. I think people who feel more connected to other areas just don't feel like they do "ethics" research, even though their research raises very interesting ethical questions.

### **Patrick Plaisance**

I do hope the trend is cyclical. And I agree with Ginny's hunch that considerable field-specific ethics pieces are going to other divisions. I think our call is quite inclusive. I think a more structured mentorship program might be helpful. Perhaps it is worthwhile to consider devoting some more of our conference time to the issue. A 'How To Do Ethics Research in Your Field' panel, like our earlier 'Hot Topics' efforts, to highlight the importance of (and strategies to) applied ethics theory to questions in digital advertising, PR, international communication, etc.

### **Sandra Borden**

I hope the phenomenon is cyclical as well. I wonder whether it is also the case that we have fewer media ethics scholars in the "pipeline." That is my impression. If so, the mentoring idea becomes even more important. We need to encourage, as well as model, good media ethics scholarship.

### **Stephanie Craft**

I don't think we can attribute the decreasing number of submissions to some "cyclical" force. Submissions to JMME aren't down, which runs counter to the notion that there is less ethics scholarship out there, and submissions to AEJMC overall aren't down either, which means that reduced travel funding isn't the problem (well, it is a problem, but why would ethics be disproportionately affected?).

So if it's not a cyclical phenomenon and/or something that can be explained by those external forces, what's the problem? I think the others who have responded have hit on a strong

possibility: That the division has a sort of identity crisis. As others have noted, MED loses papers to other divisions all the time -- if I write a paper about public relations ethics, I can send it to the PR division or MED. My allegiance might be more to PR, if that's the route I took into academia.

I like the ideas about improving mentorship and making the "how to" stuff a part of MED's program. I also think we could heighten the division's profile and attract people to that mentoring by, perhaps, putting out two kinds of calls -- one for case studies of recent events and the other for ethics scholarship. I guess what I'm suggesting is that we invite people in by making room for some stuff that's really more media criticism than ethics scholarship and, once invited, show them how the other half lives.

### **Shannon Bowen**

Everyone has made great points and the ideas that have come out of the discussion are fantastic. I would echo needing to make out division seem accessible and less intimidating. I hear rumors that MED is full of stuffy old codgers talking endlessly about Aristotle -- a real disincentive to those who are interested in ethics but know little about philosophy. I even hear grad students parrot that idea as a reason not to submit papers to MED - despite our awards.

Although none of us are personally intimidating (I think we are the nicest division out there!), the subject area can appear vast and scary to the members of other divisions -- and our members as intellectually distant. How do we appear to be less intimidating? We may attract more newcomers through the case study and softer approach, who can then become more involved with ethics after some positive initial contact with us.

### **Kati Tusinski Berg**

As the immediate past chair, I was baffled when I saw our submission numbers last year. Interestingly, year after year our pre-conference teaching workshop is packed with faculty from various divisions, which is fantastic but makes me wonder if some faculty who teach ethics may not be focusing their research on ethics. Second, I totally agree with Shannon's assessment of MED. I became active in the division because of the people who were always so welcoming and encouraging. I can say that I have not had the same experience with other divisions.

Since I do ethics research, it always seemed like the natural and appropriate division for my research. However, I agree that others do not see themselves in this way, which is why their first inclination is to submit to their primary interest division (PR, political communication, etc.). I like the case study idea and the mentoring idea. My introduction to MED came from graduate student friends (Wendy Wyatt) and graduate faculty (Tom Bivins) so maybe we need to urge faculty to encourage graduate student participation.

### **Jack Breslin**

We need an on-going dialogue to address not just the submission problem, but continuing to build interest in MED. Looking at the media ethics books on your bookshelf, what percentage of those scholars are active in MED - come to meetings, engage in a dialogue, submit papers,

etc.? How does APPE continue to attract interest from a variety of professions? What about those Ethics Bowl students (a most impressive group), even though they might be undergrads?

As programming chair, I was shocked at the number of divisions and interests groups that tacked on MED at the end of their co-sponsor list (i.e., when in doubt try ethics.) Some panels even featured MED as a co-sponsor for topics totally unrelated to our field. Maybe we need to do some PR work among AEJMC about our purpose, relevance, and resources.

A workshop and panel about doing research in ethics would be a great idea. We can also expand what we accept - maybe a research panel with a case studies approach. How about more "reflective papers," especially on teaching? How about a grassroots efforts directed toward grad students through their professors? The grad students are our future.

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## 2013 MED Program Schedule

by **Kevin Stoker**  
Program Chair

MED Division Head Bastiaan Vanacker and I faced several moral dilemmas as we took part in the historic, final AEJMC chip auction this past December. We entered into agreements with other divisions and interest groups and then had to determine whether we prioritized our projects over theirs or worked for win-win solutions. We tried to strike a balance between fairness and cutthroat competition. In the end, I feel like we put together a beneficent schedule while causing minimal harm to our fellow divisions and interest groups.



### Thursday

8:15 to 9:45 am: Joint teaching panel with Community College Journalism Association.

#### ***Student Journalists Gone Wild***

- Students are being told to post stories online, update, implement social media, and above all, to be ethical and responsible journalists. But what happens when student journalists set up their own websites or leave inflammatory comments on other news/opinion sites? This session will showcase student journalists who have not only ruined their own reputations but brought student publications down with them.

10:00 to 11:30 am: Media Ethics Refereed Research Session

3:15 to 4:45 pm: Media Ethics Refereed Research Session

5:00 to 6:30 pm: Joint Professional Freedom and Responsibility panel with Mass Communication & Society Division

***Wanted, A Free and Responsible Press: The Scholarship of John C. Merrill (1924-2012)***

- This panel commemorates the scholarship of John C. Merrill, a seminal and catalytic scholar in journalism ethics and international studies. Merrill died in September 2012, following more than a half-century of scholarship and teaching.

## Friday

8:15 to 9:45 am: Joint PFR panel with Law and Policy Division

### ***Blasphemy, Freedom of Speech and Global Communication***

- This panel will attempt to answer the following questions: What exactly are the boundaries of offensive free speech? How do these boundaries differ from country to country, even in nations known for their acceptance of free expression? Where is blasphemy legislation still on the books and enforced? Is there a double standard against Islam in relation to enforcement of curbs on free speech? Does Google/YouTube face an ethical demand to distribute information freely without restrictions?

11:45 am to 1:15 pm: Joint teaching panel with Small Programs Interest Group

### ***Hot Topics Panel: The tradeoffs of journalism on smart phones***

5:00 to 6:30 pm: Refereed Research Session

6:45 to 8:15 pm: Members Business Meeting

## Saturday

12:15 to 1:30 pm: Solo sponsored PF&R Panel

### ***Non-Western Approaches for Analyzing Ethical Dilemmas in Participatory Journalism, Popular Culture and Social Media***

- The so-called Arab Spring was successful, in part, because of the ubiquity of communication platforms worldwide and citizen access to smart phones and social media, such as Facebook. If the currency of good journalism is accuracy and fairness—even though objectivity remains elusive—then it seems appropriate at this time that we explore non-Western philosophical frameworks for confronting and dealing with ethical dilemmas in reporting and sharing of information. Indeed, the tragic circumstances following the infamous 16-minute anti-Muhammad film via YouTube make it all the more urgent for media practitioners to consider alternative approaches to the ethics of communicating information in our ever-shrinking globe.

## Sunday

9:15 to 10:45 am: Refereed Research Session

12:45 to 2:15 pm: Joint PF&R Panel with International Communication Division

***Press Freedom Principles: Do They Work in the Middle East?*** (Potential Co-Sponsors: Electronic News Division, Newspaper and Online News Division, and Media Ethics Division; Civic and Citizen Journalism Interest Group)

- AEJMC and its members are committed to propagating principles of press freedom. In many countries our training and professional practice in the US or working outside the US for US-owned media companies conflict with local media practices. How do we reconcile press freedom and the reality of a severely restricted press? How do we communicate to our students or the journalists we train about press freedom without endangering their safety?

2:30 to 4:00 pm: Joint teaching panel with Media Management & Economics Division

***Diversity in curriculum: Incorporating teaching media management into other curriculum***

- Media management and economics is an interdisciplinary field of research that can be integrated into the teaching of a variety of courses. This panel discusses the diverse ways of incorporating the teaching of media management into classes in telecommunication, journalism, electronic media, and mass communications.

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## Lessons to be Learned from the Manti Te'o Saga

by **Matt J. Duffy**  
PF&R Chair

The recent media hoax surrounding a Notre Dame football players' nonexistent girlfriend offers a timely reminder about the ethics of good journalism—particularly in relation to “old media” and “new media.”

For many stalwart professors and old-school newspapermen, the advent of new media equals an obligatory dilution of standards and talents. This archaic view perceives any new media outlet that doesn't have roots in old media (i.e., a print edition or broadcast partner) on par with a pajamas-laden blogger spouting nothing but uninformed opinion.

Anytime the digital media make a mistake, these types crow about the dangers of trusting such new-fangled media outlets and bang on their old-media desks about their long-standing ethical principles and high standards. But, as the Manti Te'o incident reminds us, those mainstream outlets tend to forget their own ethical failures and the digital media's successes.

For the unaware: Manti Te'o is a player for Notre Dame who major media outlets reported had lost both his grandmother and his girlfriend to cancer during the season. He reportedly heard the news about his girlfriend's death and then led his team to an upset victory over a big rival. The heart-warming story factored into his consideration for the Heisman Trophy, college football's most valued award, which (fortunately) went to another player. At least 21 media outlets [never bothered](#) verify Te'o's story. The culpable include: The Associated Press, ESPN, *Sports Illustrated*, *USA Today*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. It's surprising because checking on the death and contacting the dead girl's family would seem to be an easy way to advance the story which developed over the fall.

We know all this because of two reporters at an online news site called [DeadSpin](#). Here's a



sample of their reporting:

*Did you enjoy the uplifting story, the tale of a man who responded to adversity by becoming one of the top players of the game? If so, stop reading.*

*Manti Te'o did lose his grandmother this past fall. Annette Santiago died on Sept. 11, 2012, at the age of 72, according to Social Security Administration records in Nexis. But there is no SSA record there of the death of Lennay Marie Kekua, that day or any other. Her passing, recounted so many times in the national media, produces no obituary or funeral announcement in Nexis, and no mention in the Stanford student newspaper.*

*Nor is there any report of a severe auto accident involving a Lennay Kekua. Background checks turn up nothing. The Stanford registrar's office has no record that a Lennay Kekua ever enrolled. There is no record of her birth in the news. Outside of a few Twitter and Instagram accounts, there's no online evidence that Lennay Kekua ever existed.*

The reporters go on—in exhaustive detail—to point out all the ways in which major media outlets failed to exercise proper journalistic norms while covering the story.

Steve Buttry, a digital journalism expert, [wrote](#) an excellent post-mortem in which he pointed out that linking to background sources as well as other accuracy and verification techniques could have raised red flags. He noted, for instance, that no journalist attempted to link to Lennay Kekua's obituary.

The reporters at DeadSpin—Timothy Burke and Jack Dickey—should be lauded for uncovering the lapse in journalistic ethics. And journalists should learn a couple of big lessons from this scandal.

First, journalists should embrace the “[ethic of the link](#).” By linking to source material, which essentially tells the reader that we've checked this information and can prove its authenticity. Linking to source material can also help avoid hoaxes like the Te'o case.

Finally, traditional media types should stop gloating and pointing fingers whenever a digital journalist makes an error. Good journalists should exercise humility and remember that the next big embarrassment could be just one, heartwarming college football story away.

*Dr. Matt J. Duffy teaches journalism as an adjunct professor at Georgia State University. You can follow him on Twitter: [@mattjduffy](#)*

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