Educate the public about journalists’ best practices

What can thoughtful journalists do to narrow the gap between perception and reality?

As a former editor, it pains me to know that many in the public dismiss journalists as sloppy, biased and uncaring. It would probably not be difficult to find individuals in the profession who live up to those labels. But my experience in newsrooms as an editor and a researcher has shown me how conscientious the best of them are.

The disconnect between the public’s perception and the reality of journalists’ best practices came home to me this summer and fall during interviews with writers and editors at The Oregonian, The Dallas Morning News and The Los Angeles Times. I was struck repeatedly by their concern about truth-telling, their efforts to ensure fairness in word choice, and their sensitivity to how stories will affect their subjects.

For example, at the Times – which some conservatives have accused of liberal bias – Deputy Managing Editor Leo Wolinsky talked about looking for evidence of bias in the Page One stories he reviews. He reads to ensure that one side’s view is not buried in the story or dismissed in a sentence, and he watches sentence constructions and descriptions.

As media scholars are well aware, it is impossible to stamp out all bias. But Wolinsky’s comments and those from other editors and writers show a level of attention to fairness that offers a jarring contrast to critics’ assumptions that journalists do not even try.

At the Morning News, feature writer Beatriz Terrazas talked about her “no surprises” policy toward subjects of her stories when they are ordinary people not savvy to the ways of journalists and not used to being in the public eye. By helping these people understand how their stories will be told before they are in print, she shows compassion that again would surprise critics.

What can thoughtful journalists do to narrow the gap between perception and reality? Part of the problem may lie in the fact that the multi-layered process of reporting, writing and editing is usually invisible to the public. Part of the solution, therefore, may come through increased efforts to explain the process and the care and thought behind it. Such efforts would be consistent with the Society of Professional Journalists ethics code’s call for accountability: “Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.”

Ways that journalists can explain themselves include:

- Boxes describing how a story was reported. Some publications have taken this approach, but it could be used to include not only who was interviewed but also the nature of reporters’ interactions with them. The explanations could include the sensitivity shown to story subjects – particularly in stories about injured or vulnerable individuals.
- Columns by front-line editors about the process by which stories are read and evaluated. It could be particularly illuminating to many.
Keeping it real may mean rethinking tradition

Erik Ugland
Vice chair/program head

O
ne evening last September as Hurricane Ivan was battering the Gulf coasts of Florida and Mississippi, I turned to our top-rated newscast here in Milwaukee – “Live at 10” on WTMJ-4 – to get the latest information. Mike Gousha, the Grand Poobah of Milwaukee anchors, opened the newscast by declaring that the station had an important exclusive on Ivan.

Gousha threw it to a WTMJ reporter who was doing a live stand-up outside the Mississippi home of Bonita Favre – the mother of deified Green Bay Packers quarterback Brett Favre. The reporter announced without a hint of embarrassment that he was there to bring us a special report on how Favre’s mom and other family members were weathering the storm.

I knew Favre was big news in Wisconsin, but this was a particularly strained tie-in. Maybe there was some tragic twist, I thought. Had somebody died? Was the Favre family missing? Nope. Ivan had drifted to the East. Everyone was fine.

“Back to you, Mike.”

I know there are good people doing valuable work in broadcast journalism, but stories like this suggest that they are a dwindling minority in an industry that has, for the most part, lost its soul. The Favre story is a small and relatively innocuous example of the broader decay of news values with which we have all become familiar. Things have gotten so bad, though, that I have begun to question my role as an ethics educator.

I tell myself that we are needed now more than ever, but there are times when I think that it is just a pointless exercise and that all we are really doing is fattening our students up for a post-graduation slaughter.

I would be less concerned for my students if I felt like they shared my outrage. Clearly they do not. They routinely see as perfectly unremarkable the very things that are, to me, sure signs of the apocalypse.

Well, despite my worries and my periodic fits of exasperation, I have not, in fact, thrown in the towel. I still do believe that we have a critical role to play, and I still do believe that our students benefit from the learning experiences that we provide.

What I have realized though is: (1) my students do not always share my values or my notions of professionalism, and (2) journalism has changed in ways that I might not like but that are probably irreversible.

I have never tried to play pied piper in the classroom, outlining a set of orthodox values and demanding that my students fall in line. But I am part of a generation that has tended to view journalism as something that should be done in a particular way and in pursuit of a set of widely accepted goals.

When I was in journalism school, everyone seemed to be on the same page – all of us singing from the same Woodward-and-Bernstein hymnal and reciting the same triumphant slogans about freedom of the press.

I think most of today’s media ethics professors are part of that same ideological cohort, and I think we all run the risk of defining professional values in a rigid way that might not resonate with our students.

Today’s students have grown up with a different set of experiences and exposures. They have never known a world where news and entertainment were not routinely intertwined. They have never lived in a world where media companies were not owned by larger corporate entities. They have never watched the “CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite.” Indeed, many have never seen the “CBS Evening News with Dan Rather”!

I am not suggesting that we should abandon the principles that have traditionally defined the profession, but we should never treat their value as self-evident.

Maybe there is a way to do journalism that is not built entirely around the principle of objectivity. Maybe a certain amount of opinion and analysis can be effectively folded into the news. Maybe there are some advantages to vertical and horizontal integration of media companies. Maybe it is not always necessary to get all sides of a story.

Maybe bloggers and independent news gatherers add something valuable to our menu of news sources. Maybe even the Matt Drudges of the world make a useful contribution by usurping the news establishment and giving breath to important facts, even if they are occasionally conjoined with falsehoods.

Clearly there is room for improvement in journalism. And it is reasonable for us to hope that our students will help change the way things are, but we will always be disappointed if we expect them to return things to the way they were.

We must do more to educate the public about journalists’ best practices

PRACTICES, from page 1

people to hear from middle- and lower-level editors – on both assigning desks and copy desks – because they often evaluate fairness and the nuances of word choice.

First-person stories in which journalists are transparent about their interactions with the subjects. I saw this approach work in a front-page feature in Dallas about an orphaned teenage girl whose relationship with the reporter began with an e-mail asking for help finding a headstone for her parents’ grave. Early in the story, the reporter was open regarding her concerns about balancing distance and connection with subjects. She voiced this concern without letting it dominate the narrative of the article.

None of those approaches is practical and appropriate all of the time, and they would all be difficult to adapt to broadcast reporting with its time constraints. But they all have potential to raise public awareness, at least the awareness of newspaper readers.

As instructors, we can encourage these practices among our journalists of the future and can even suggest them to media outlets where our ideas have a hearing.
With this year’s special paper call on “Ethics and Electoral Politics,” the division should be in a good position to attract quality submissions from a wide range of research interests, but I particularly hope the call catches the eyes of graduate students looking for a home for their work if it’s related at all to our focus. And I hope those of us who teach graduate students will nudge them in our direction before the April 1 deadline rolls around. As coordinator for this year’s paper competition, I obviously have a short-term interest in attracting more student involvement. But I also think doing so is critical to carry out what I think is the MED’s long-term obligation to enriching mass communications research in general, and the activities of AEJMC more specifically.

Simply put, the MED must work to cultivate a broad understanding of what I would argue is the unchanging, urgent role that ethical deliberation should have in any communications research. This year’s focus on electoral politics and communication should help us do just that.

With a divisive and media-saturated election season just behind us, this year’s theme can help us further broaden our division’s scope. Simply put, the MED must work to cultivate a broad understanding of what I would argue is the unchanging, urgent role that ethical deliberation should have in any communications research. This year’s focus on electoral politics and communication should help us do just that.

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f all the media professions, public relations is possibly
the hardest in which to find
good case studies – perhaps
because so much of what PR does
happens behind the scenes.

Patrick Plaisance of Colorado
State University has discovered one
case, however, that he says never
fails to get his ethics class engaged.

The case is built around the U.S.
State Department’s post-9/11
Shared Values campaign, which
was intended to show Muslim audi-
ences a tolerant, welcoming Ameri-
can. If you’re not familiar with the
case, several discussions of it are
available online, or you can find
Patrick’s description of the case in
Patterson and Wilkins’ text, Media
Ethics: Issues and Cases (5th ed.).

After introducing the topic by
showing students what the PR pro-
fession says it values — via the
Public Relations Society of
America’s code of ethics — Patrick
gets students involved by asking them to think
about the difference between legiti-
mate public relations strategies and
propaganda. “It’s a deceptively dif-
ficult question,” he says. “And it
provokes great discussion.”

To supplement the students’ defi-
nitions, Patrick adds others:

Share your teaching ideas

Have you done something in your
class that works really well? Are you
willing to share it with us?
If so, please send a description of the
activity, assignment, etc. to Wendy
Wyatt Barger at wnbarger@stthomas.edu, and we’ll include it in the
newsletter.

◆ Propaganda contains charac-
teristics one associates
with dogmatism or
closed-mindedness; …
This type of communica-
tion seems noncreative and appears
to have as its purpose the evaluative
narrowing of its receivers. Whereas
creative communication accepts
pluralism and displays expectations
that its receivers should conduct
further investigations of its obser-
vations, allegations and conclu-
sions, propaganda does not appear
to do so (Black 2001).

◆ Propaganda exploits informa-
tion; it poses as knowledge; it gen-
erates belief systems and tenacious
convictions; it skews perceptions; it
systematically disregards superior
epistemic values such as truth and
understanding; it corrupts reason-
ing and the respect for evidence; it
supplies ersatz certainties (Cun-
ningham, 2002).

During the course of this discus-
sion, Patrick says many students
make the distinction between prop-
aganda and good public relations by
saying the former is generally a
“negative” message and the latter is
a generally “positive” one. One
example of a negative message that
comes to students’ minds is the
infamous Nazi war posters.

Next, students read a description
of the Shared Values campaign and
view the series of five video seg-
ments. Patrick asks them to put
the campaign up against the various
definitions of propaganda to see
how it compares.

And, alas, the pay-off: Students
see that a message can be propa-
gandistic even when it is happy and
positive.