

Ethical News

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Media Ethics Division

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Educate the public about journalists' best practices

David Craig
PF&R chair

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 sen-

What can thoughtful journalists do
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sitivity 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 journal-

ists 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

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APPE gives MED members a chance to preview San Antonio

Kris Bunton
Division head

All San Antonio, all the time: That's what I've been thinking again lately. (And frankly, when I see snow from my office window here in Minnesota, thinking about Texas is not a bad thing.)

Our MED vice-head and programming chair Erik Ugland has just finished negotiating the slate of panels and programs MED will offer next summer at the annual AEJMC convention in San Anto-

nio, and he's done an excellent job. I think you'll be pleased at the wide array of ethics-related topics he's worked onto the program. But I'll let him write more about those details next issue.

Meanwhile, Dave Boeyink, too, has done an excellent job as our MED programming liaison to the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics. The APPE meeting, during which MED is sponsoring a slate of panels and paper sessions as part of our second mid-year collaboration with that organization, is also in San Antonio, and

it's just around the corner. Because Dave's broken hand prevents him from typing, I'd like to tell you about that meeting and encourage you to make plans to join us in San Antonio Feb. 24 through 27. (You should receive a conference mailing from APPE any day now; it contains the full program of sessions, as well as information about registration fees and hotel costs. If you don't receive that information via mail soon, you can find it online at www.indiana.edu/~appe/.)

This year, MED has increased

its presence at APPE and will co-sponsor eight sessions. Here they are:

Friday, Feb. 25

◆ **10 to 11 a.m.:** "Jacob Riis, Lincoln Steffens and Walter Lippmann: Spiritual Journeys in Early 20th Century Journalism?" Ed Lambeth, University of Missouri.

◆ **11 a.m. to 12 p.m.:** "Ethics and Editorial Responsibilities: The Case of Tule Lake," Marilyn Dyrud, Oregon Institute of Technology.

◆ **1:45 to 3:45 p.m.:** "What Does

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Keeping it real may mean rethinking tradition

Erik Uglad
Vice chair/program head

One 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.

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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 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.

Encourage graduate students to submit research papers to MED

Patrick Plaisance
Research chair

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 topic undoubtedly offers any number of ways for students of politics, marketing, public relations, opinion research, journalism and media ethics to fit into the Media Ethics Division tent. Or, to exploit another analogy, the intersection of media ethics and electoral politics is multi-laned and covers a

Paper reviewers needed

If a paper is submitted to MED and no one is there to review it, does it make a sound? Not unless you count the sobbing of the research chair.

As submissions to the division increase (we hope), so does the need for paper reviewers. Please consider volunteering your time and effort this spring to review papers submitted for the 2005 AEJMC conference. The task is not onerous – reviewers typically read 5 papers – and the more reviewers, the fewer papers per reviewer. Truly a case of the more, the merrier. Generally speaking, MED members who are submitting papers for the conference do not also review submissions.

Contact research chair Patrick Plaisance (patrick.plaisance@colostate.edu) to offer your reviewing services or to ask questions about the review process.

lot of asphalt.

To quote our call: "Possible topics include, but are not limited to: proposed theoretical approaches to ethical questions raised by political messages; journalism ethics issues regarding political news coverage; questions of representation in political news; ethical issues related to political strategizing and advertising efforts; explorations of the dynamic of interaction among journalists, politicians and campaign 'spin doctors'; analyses of the use of propaganda; and explorations of the ethical dimensions of political discourse online or in other specific

media."

For last year's conference in Toronto, our overall submissions increased from 22 the previous year to 36, according to Erik Ugland, last year's research chair – an increase largely due to the appeal of our excellent focus on media literacy. However, Erik and others expressed a desire to boost student submissions in the future. It's a critical goal, and I am excited by the prospect that this year's theme will help us to equal or exceed the student submissions of 2004.

Clearly, the topic should help the division in accomplishing its annual goal of "crossing boundaries" and teaming up with people who may move more comfortably in other division circles. Timeliness also is a big factor in the topic's appeal, of course. But I also hope this year's topic can help us further broaden our division base and attract young scholars who may help enrich ethics research. It's an opportunity to demonstrate that claims of and justifications for normative standards are necessary components of any examination of communication.

Ethics is indeed one discipline that truly crosses all media and specializations featured by the various AEJMC divisions and interest groups. Ideally, an AEJMC conference in which program chairs from other divisions seek MED involvement in many of their panels would be the rule, not the exception.

We're a ways off from that, but a key strategy to help us realize this lofty (and self-righteous?) goal is to cultivate relationships with young scholars who are given opportunities to discern how intrinsic the discourse of ethics is – or ought to be – to any communicative enterprise.

Get an early taste of San Antonio at APPE's conference in February

CONVENTION, from page 1

Corporate Media Consolidation Portend For American Democracy? News Incorporated: Corporate Media Ownership and Its Threat to Democracy," Elliot Cohen, editor, *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*; Art Levine, California State University-Long Beach; and Arthur Kent, producer, *Fast Forward Films*.

◆ **4:15 to 5:45 p.m.:** "Teaching Values and Moral Development to Media Ethics Students," Jay Black, University of South Florida; Edward Spence, Charles Stuart University; Patrick Plaisance, Colorado State University; Lee Wilkins, University of Missouri; and Lee Anne Peck, University of Northern Colorado.

Saturday, Feb. 26

◆ **8 to 9:30 a.m.:** "Critical Conversations: A New System for Press Accountability," Wendy Wyatt

Barger, University of St. Thomas; and "Making Credibility Appeals Credible: Avoiding Popularity Contests," Stephanie Craft, University of Missouri, and Christopher Meyers, California State University-Bakersfield.

◆ **10 a.m. to 12 p.m.:** "Constitutionally Protecting Profit: The First Amendment and the Business of Journalism," Christopher Meyers, California State University-Bakersfield; Lee Wilkins, University of Missouri; Hazel Dicken-Garcia, University of Minnesota; and David Ozar, Loyola University-Chicago.

◆ **1:30 to 3:30 p.m.:** "The Role of Emotion in the News Professions and Professional Ethics," Peggy Bowers, Clemson University; Linda Steiner, Rutgers University; Tom Bivins, University of Oregon; and Wendy Wyatt Barger, University of St. Thomas.

◆ **4 to 5:30 p.m.:** "Politically Correct: An Analy-

sis of Viewpoints Guiding a Journalist's Involvement in Politics," Kris Boyle, Brigham Young University; "Media's Responsibility to Report on Religion," Karen Steen, Tampa; and "Martha Stewart: Atoning for the Sins of Corporate Corruption. An Examination of an American Media Scapegoat," Jeff Neely, University of South Florida.

Also, from 5:45 to 6:45 p.m. Friday, we'll have a MED members' meeting. Please let me know if you have items for the agenda.

Finally, if you're not in either of APPE's "lunch with an author" sessions on Friday or Saturday, and you'd like to have lunch with colleagues, find me at the meeting and let me know. The hotel's close to San Antonio's RiverWalk and thus within easy walking distance of several restaurants we might venture to for lunchtime dining and conversation.

TAKING IT TO THE CLASSROOM ...

A good case to show differences between PR and propoganda

Wendy Wyatt Barger
Teaching chair

Of 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 audiences a tolerant, welcoming America. 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 profession 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 legitimate public relations strategies and propaganda. "It's a deceptively difficult question," he says. "And it provokes great discussion."

To supplement the students' definitions, Patrick adds others:

◆ Any anti-rational process consisting of pressure-techniques used to induce [people] to commit [themselves], before they can think the matter over freely, to such attitudes, opinions or acts as the propagandist desires of him (Henderson,

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.

1943).

◆ ...Propaganda contains characteristics one associates with dogmatism or closed-mindedness; ...

This type of communication 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 observations, allegations and conclusions, propaganda does not appear to do so (Black 2001).

◆ Propaganda exploits information; it poses as knowledge; it generates belief systems and tenacious convictions; it skews perceptions; it systematically disregards superior

epistemic values such as truth and understanding; it corrupts reasoning and the respect for evidence; rigor and procedural safeguards; it supplies ersatz certainties (Cunningham, 2002).

During the course of this discussion, Patrick says many students make the distinction between propaganda 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 segments. 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 propagandistic even when it is happy and positive.

Send items for the spring newsletter to Stephanie Craft (crafts@missouri.edu) no later than Feb. 15, 2005.

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