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Part I: A Foundation for Making Ethical Decisions

1 Why Ethics Matters in Journalism

Our society needs news professionals who do the right thing

- Contemporary journalists are keenly aware of the ethics of the profession; they deal frequently with ethics questions in their working lives.
- In a profession that cannot be regulated because of the First Amendment, responsible journalists adhere voluntarily to high standards of conduct.
- The goal of this book and course is to teach you how to make ethically sound decisions.
- Discussing case studies in class is crucial to learning the decision-making process.
- The digital era, which has radically changed the way the news is gathered and delivered, has provoked controversy over whether ethics should radically change as well.
- Confronted with a daily deluge of information, the public depends on ethical journalists for news that can be trusted.

Point of View: A “Tribal Ferocity” Enforces the Code (John Carroll)

2 Ethics, the Bedrock of a Society

An introduction to terms and concepts in an applied-ethics course

- Ethics is about discerning between right and wrong – and then doing what is right.
- Ancient societies developed systems of ethics that still influence human behavior.
- Ethics and law may be related, but they are not the same; law prescribes minimum standards of conduct, while ethics prescribes exemplary conduct.
- A member of a society absorbs its ethical precepts through a process of socialization.
- A person’s values shape the choices he or she makes.
- When ethical values conflict, an ethical dilemma results.
- The ethical person learns how to make decisions when facing ethical dilemmas.
3 The News Media’s Role in Society

The profession has matured and accepted social responsibility

• Journalists generally agree that their highest ethical principles are to seek truth, serve the public, and maintain independence from the people they report on.
• Journalism, like other professions and institutions, owes society a moral duty called social responsibility.
• In the 1940s the Hutchins Commission defined journalism’s social responsibility: to provide reliable information for the community.
• An ethical awakening occurred in journalism during the decade beginning in the mid-1970s.
• During this period of reform, many news organizations codified their principles.
• Today’s practice of journalism reflects decades of rising professionalism.

Point of View: The Case for Transparency (Jane B. Singer)

4 For Journalists, a Clash of Moral Duties

Responsibilities as professionals and as human beings can conflict

• In the abstract, journalists should avoid becoming involved with the events and the people they cover.
• However, certain situations require journalists to decide whether they should step out of their observer role and become participants.
• In those situations, guidelines can help journalists reach sound decisions.

Point of View: Journalists Are Humans, Too (Halle Stockton)
Case Study: The Journalist as a Witness to Suffering

5 The Public and the Media: Love and Hate

The goal for the journalist should be respect, not popularity

• Even as the news media mature and accept their social responsibility, the public is increasingly hostile toward them.
• As a journalist, you should be aware of this hostility and the likely reasons for it.
• You should treat the audience with respect and take complaints seriously.
• Stripping away the rancor, you can find useful lessons in the public’s criticism.
• The public’s hostility has to be put in perspective; it may not be as bad as it seems.

Point of View: Connecting with the Audience in a Digital Dialogue (Mark Bowden)
Point of View: Journalism, Seen from the Other Side (Jane Shoemaker)
Case Study: Roughed Up at Recess
6 Applying Four Classic Theories of Ethics
Ancient philosophy can help you make sound decisions

- Introducing the four classic theories.
- Strengths and weaknesses of rule-based thinking.
- Strengths and weaknesses of ends-based thinking.
- Strengths and weaknesses of the Golden Rule.
- Strengths and weaknesses of Aristotle’s Golden Mean.
- The value of blending rule-based thinking and ends-based thinking in the practice of journalism.

7 Using a Code of Ethics as a Decision Tool
Written professional standards are valuable in resolving dilemmas

- Ethics codes in journalism trace their origins to the early twentieth century.
- Codes adopted by professional associations are voluntary and advisory; codes adopted by news outlets for the direction of their staffs are enforceable.
- Codes can be useful as a part of the decision process, not as a substitute for that process.
- The Society of Professional Journalists’ 2014 code, a model for the profession, contains four guiding principles: seek truth and report it; minimize harm; act independently; and be accountable and transparent.

Point of View: Reporting a Fact, Causing Harm (William F. Woo)
Point of View: Impartial Journalism’s Enduring Value (Thomas Kent)
Case Study: The Death of a Boy
Case Study: A Double Disaster at the Sago Mine

8 Making Moral Decisions You Can Defend
The key ingredients are critical thinking and a decision template

- You can polish your decision-making skills by drawing on the practical skills of journalism: gathering facts, analyzing them, and making judgments.
- Critical thinking, or thoughtful analysis, is an essential component of the decision process.
- A step-by-step template can guide you to a better decision.
- You must test your decision to see if it can be defended.
- In this course, approach the case studies as a laboratory for decision-making.

Point of View: Rationalizations in Decision-Making (Michael Josephson)
Case Study: Deciding Whether to Identify a CIA Agent
Part II: Exploring Themes of Ethics Issues in Journalism

9 Stolen Words, Invented Facts … or Worse

Plagiarism, fabrication, and other mistakes that can kill a career

• Plagiarism and fabrication are morally wrong. Plagiarism is stealing the creative work of another. Fabrication is making things up and presenting them as fact.
• The offenses of plagiarism and fabrication destroy journalism’s credibility and cost offenders their jobs and their careers.
• Committing illegal acts is unacceptable in the pursuit of news.
• Following sound work practices can help you avoid any hint of impropriety.
• Newsroom leaders have a duty to establish clear rules about journalistic misconduct and to enforce them.

10 Conflicts of Interest: Appearances Count

Journalists should leave no doubt of their primary loyalty to the audience

• Because a conflict of interest gives the audience reason to doubt the journalist’s loyalty, it undermines credibility.
• An appearance of a conflict of interest can damage credibility even if the journalist’s reporting is honest.
• By following reasonable guidelines, you can avoid most conflicts, real or apparent.
• This chapter discusses situations that commonly lead to conflicts.

Case Study: Covering Police, Wearing Their Uniform
Case Study: Carrying the Torch, Stirring Controversy
Case Study: A Love Triangle on the Evening News

11 The Business of Producing Journalism

In a turbulent era of transition, news companies seek financial stability

• Technological and economic transition has caused tensions in today’s news media. More people are getting their news digitally, but online sites are struggling to find stable sources of revenue.
• Although advertisers have traditionally financed journalism, they cannot be allowed to influence journalism.
• Media companies’ efforts to increase revenue have led to some ethically questionable practices.
• The business and news executives of media companies frequently have a strained relationship, mainly because their cultures are so different.

Point of View: Tangoing without a Partner (Gene Roberts)
Case Study: Sharing Ad Profits, Creating a Crisis
12 Getting the Story Right and Being Fair

Newswriting skills of accuracy and fairness are ethical skills, too

- Accuracy and fairness are journalism’s fundamental ethical values.
- The digital era, with its emphasis on speed, entices reporters to take shortcuts — and thus to make mistakes.
- Social media have become an essential tool for news reporting, but professional journalists must verify everything.
- Journalists have to be alert for hoaxes, especially on the Web.
- Journalists should promptly and clearly correct any mistakes they make.

Point of View: Declaring What You Won’t Report (Craig Silverman)
Point of View: Decision-Making in the Digital Age (James M. Naughton)
Case Study: Richard Jewell: He Really Was a Hero
Case Study: A Story of Rape at Mr. Jefferson’s University
Case Study: The Football Star’s Fictitious Girlfriend
Case Study: Verifying a Key Boston Video (Malachy Browne)

13 Dealing with Sources of Information

The fine line between getting close but not too close

- Ethical issues arise in the reporter’s efforts to cultivate sources while maintaining an independence from those sources.
- If a journalist agrees to protect a source who provides information on condition of anonymity, honoring that agreement is a solemn ethical duty.
- This chapter examines recurring situations in which ethics issues arise in source relationships.

Point of View: Sometimes, Different Rules Apply (Jeffrey Fleishman)

14 Making News Decisions about Privacy

The public may need to know what individuals want hidden

- Journalists often have to decide between the public’s legitimate need to have certain information and the desire for privacy by the individuals involved.
- Although there are certain legal restraints on publicizing private information, most decisions are made on the basis of ethics rather than law.
- A three-step template can help you make decisions in privacy cases.
- This chapter examines reporting situations in which privacy is central to decision-making.

Case Study: Tracing the Source of Web Comments
Case Study: Mapping the Locations of Gun Owners
Case Study: Identifying a 13-Year-Old Rape Victim
15 Making News Decisions about Taste

The conflict between reflecting reality and respecting the audience

- Journalists often have to decide whether to publish, broadcast, or post content that could offend a significant element of the audience.
- Offensive content falls into three categories: perceived insensitivity, offensive words, and offensive images.
- A two-step process can help you make decisions, weighing news value against offensiveness.

Case Study: Reporting on a Vulgar List in the News
Case Study: Covering a Public Official’s Public Suicide

16 Deception, a Controversial Reporting Tool

When values collide: Lying while seeking the truth

- To decide whether to use a deceptive reporting practice, you first must acknowledge the deceit and not rationalize it.
- Before engaging in undercover reporting – pretending to be someone else – you must meet exacting standards.
- There are other situations, short of undercover, in which journalists could deceive or could be perceived as deceiving.
- You should never deceive the audience or your colleagues.

Point of View: The Truth about Deception (Brooke Kroeger)
Case Study: Rumsfeld’s Q&A with the Troops
Case Study: Spying on the Mayor in a Chat Room

17 Covering a Diverse, Multicultural Society

An ethical duty to be sensitive in reporting on minority groups

- Covering society’s diversity is an ethical responsibility, because news organizations have a duty to cover the entire community.
- Careful, sensitive reporting is required to analyze the complex issues of racial and ethnic conflicts.
- You should study techniques that can help you do a better job of covering cultures other than your own.
- Reporters who cover new immigrants are finding that the assignment presents specific ethics issues.
- Sensitivity is needed in covering gays and lesbians in the news.

Point of View: Gaining Respect by Showing Respect (Joann Byrd)
Case Study: When a Story Gets Its Subject Arrested (Sharyn Vane)

18 Ethics Issues Specific to Digital Journalism

Online, there are huge opportunities and some problems

- Although ethical issues pertaining to digital journalism are discussed throughout the book, this chapter focuses on issues specific to that news-delivery platform.
• Requests from the public to “unpublish” archival content creates an ethical dilemma. News organizations should resist deleting the digital record while also being considerate of the human problems stemming from the permanence of that record.
• Although the Internet empowers the audience to be heard, news organizations need to find ways to curb incivility.
• Hyperlinks in online news stories help journalists be transparent about their sources.
• Social-media participation and blogging provide benefits, but journalists have to be careful not to undermine their credibility as impartial observers.

Point of View: Let’s Have Rules for Online Comment (Edward Wasserman)
Case Study: For a Reporter-Blogger, Two Personalities

19 Ethics Issues Specific to Visual Journalism

Seeking truth with the camera while minimizing harm
• The public must be able to trust the truthfulness of the news media’s photographs and video.
• An image can be distorted either by stage-managing the scene or by manipulating the image.
• Photojournalists have adopted standards to ensure the integrity of their images.
• Recognizing that some images can offend, journalists weigh these images’ news value against the likely offense.
• The presence of photojournalists and their cameras can cause psychological harm, whether or not the images are disseminated.

Case Study: The Falling Man, World Trade Center, 2001
Case Study: Photographing a Man Pushed to His Death
Case Study: A Marine Is Mortally Wounded

20 Some Thoughts to Take with You

Capsules of advice for aspiring journalists
• This chapter summarizes the lessons learned in your course in journalism ethics.

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