

Course Syllabus

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Choices and Consequences: Ethics for Mass Communicators

Journalism is an ethical and cultural act--and at a time when anyone with an Internet connection can be a publisher and report the news, what distinguishes professional communicators from the amateurs are the values and ethics that guide their work.

Journalism is also a collaborative act. Reporters, editors, photojournalists, videographers and designers work together and support each other. That will be a model for this class--and our success depends on your enthusiastic participation. We will be discussing some sensitive and controversial topics, so it's important that we all approach discussions with an open mind and a civil tongue.

Whether you are a reporter, editor, photojournalist, videographer, graphic designer or public relations specialist, every choice you make tests your ethics and values. Every story, image, video or promotional effort carries personal and professional consequences.

On good days, those consequences align with the guiding principles of journalism, as promulgated by the Society of Professional Journalists: to seek the truth and report it, fully and fairly; to minimize harm, bear witness to the world around you; give voice to the voiceless; hold the powerful to account and provide people with the information they need to make enlightened decisions about their lives.

On other days, you may be caught in conflict between your professional obligations and your basic human impulses. You may struggle to maintain your sense of fairness, balance and objectivity. You may find it hard to discern the truth. You may be asked to tell lies. Your actions may do actual harm to your subject, your community, your publication or yourself.

Ethical dilemmas are not questions of right versus wrong. More often, they are cases of right versus right -- when you are caught between two valid but conflicting values. Sometimes they are questions of wrong versus less wrong. In media and in life, the ethical landscape is generally painted in shades of gray.

In this class you will

- Learn to recognize ethical dilemmas, analyze the issues at stake and make defensible decisions
- Understand what it means to be an ethical journalist or public relations professional
- Develop an understanding of ethical issues in a global context
- Develop an understanding of philosophy, ethical theory and the guiding principles of journalism to help you make ethically sound decisions in your professional life and your personal life.

Method

This class is all about reading, thinking, writing and talking. Reading assignments, case studies and related study questions are due before class. Be prepared to draw on what you've learned from these readings in class discussions.

Most of our work takes place in class, so your attendance is key to your success. Seminar discussions focusing on eight in-class case studies and two decision papers will tackle a broad range of issues, including:

- The nature of truth
- Bearing witness to violence and suffering
- Ethical use of social media
- The escalating battle between whistleblowers, news media and government
- Ethics in the news
- Objectivity, "he said/she said" journalism and false balance
- Ethical challenges for visual journalists
- The ethical public relations campaign
- Conflicts of interest
- Mistakes, lies and corrections
- Reporting on sensitive subjects: sexual ethics, rape, abortion and suicide
- The ethical dimension of social issues

Your obligations

- Answer study questions on assigned readings and case studies
- Co-lead an in-class discussion of one case study in media ethics.
- Write two 1500-word decision papers analyzing case studies in media ethics.
- Ethics in action: an ethical decision-making exercise in real time. This is your "semifinal" exam. (So named because it's too late to be a "midterm".)
- Write a major research project for the quarter and present your findings to the class.

Texts:

"How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living," by Rushworth M. Kidder. Harper-Collins. (Available in paperback at the bookstore or in [e-book format on Google Play](#).)

Many of the case studies we will study are drawn from [Columbia University Journalism School Case Studies in Media Ethics](#).

Online Resources for this Course:

[Ethical Theories](#)

[Guiding Principles For Journalists](#)

[Checklist For Evaluating Case Studies](#)

[Public Relations Society of America Code of Ethics](#)

[Reuters Handbook of Journalism](#)

Grading:

Attendance: 100 points

Study questions: 140 points

- Assigned readings from Kidder and case studies (to be answered before class):

Presentation: 50 points

- Co-lead an in-class presentation and analysis of a case study

Writing: 200 points

- Write two 1500-word decision papers analyzing case studies @ 100 points each

"Semifinal" exam: 100 points

- Ethics in action: an in-class exercise in which you make ethical decisions on a breaking news story in real time

Research Project: 300 points

- - In a 2000-word essay, research an ethical issue in mass media, society or popular culture. Use current research studies, media reports and scholarly publications to explain the issue in detail, describe the ethical dilemmas, identify stakeholders and explore multiple alternatives to resolve the dilemma.
 - or:
 - Research and analyze the content and strategies, ethics and effectiveness of two competing public relations campaigns, based on the ethical principles we have discussed in class and the [Public Relations Society of America Code of Ethics](#).
 - or:
 - Conduct a media audit, analyzing how different news organizations covered the same topic and analyzing their ethics.
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- Presentation of research paper to class: 50 points.

The course will use this grading scale:

A (93-100%)

A- (90-92%)

B+ (87-89%)

B (83-86%)

B- (80-82%)

C+ (77-79%)

C (73-76%)

C- (70-72%)

D+ (67-69%)

D (63-67%)

D- (60-62%)

F (59% or lower)

This is a paper-free class

- All essays and projects should be uploaded to Canvas via Word doc
- Answer graded study questions with text entries uploaded directly to Canvas.

Trust, Accuracy, Transparency and Fairness

Your grade on decision papers is based on your ability to demonstrate critical thinking when evaluating issues; to adopt a point of view and clearly communicate it; to openly explore other points of view and back up your conclusion with relevant examples and well-formed reasoning.

There are no right or wrong answers in this class. But following your gut instinct is not an option. What counts is the quality of your analysis, grounded in ethical theory, the guiding principles of journalism and mass communication.

All work for this class will conform to the highest ethical standards: all work is original; all sources properly cited and all interview subjects treated with respect.

Academic honesty

Mass communicators who lose their integrity lose everything. All your work should be original, with sources properly cited and attributed. Plagiarism, unapproved collaboration and copying off the Internet are serious violations that could result in a failing grade and more serious consequences at the university level. While we will have vigorous discussions about sensitive and controversial subjects, hate speech will not be tolerated.

TurnItIn anti-plagiarism software may be used to generate originality reports for assigned papers.