

Ethics Audit Assignment

Audit Summary due Oct. 29

Due: Fri., Dec. 11 at 8 a.m. (Early turn in is OK.)

Requirements: min. of 8 typed, double-spaced pages (12 pt. type). The page count does not include charts and graphics you may choose to provide.

Intro: Conducting an audit allows you to see principles in action. By thoroughly examining coverage, you improve your media literacy. After gathering your data, use your critical-thinking skills to examine the key issues from class discussions: truth/transparency/trust, privacy and pressures, visual elements, diversity and stereotypes, etc.

As we have studied, news media coverage of major events has often spawned commissions and studies of news media practice. As well, it has caused self-examination to see how well the news media walks its talk. Your audit is this type of analysis. Examine how well a newspaper is fulfilling its obligations.

Objectives: Perform a content analysis (basically, count how often something appears), compile your results, examine the ethical issues in your own view and in light of what scholars have said about those key principals.

1. You will be examining, daily, the print edition of *The Seattle Times*, which is available in the journalism department reading room and Wilson library. You must use the print, rather than the online edition; they are different.
2. You will select something to audit. Some ideas might include an audit of front-page photos, examining who is pictured (and who is absent); an examination of each day's top story on A1 or the top of the local section; an examination of when and how race and ethnicity are used in stories; or an audit of male and female sources in business stories.
3. Each day, you will perform your audit and record your findings. After 30 days, you will explore how well the newspaper's coverage has reflected its community. For example, maybe there were 25 stories about Japanese community members, but none about Korean community members despite the fact that there are more Koreans than Japanese in Seattle.
4. Your final paper will be an analysis of your findings as well as an analysis of the ethical issues presented. It is not enough to count something; you must also get into how the results might affect the community of readers.
5. You may choose to compare/contrast another media outlet *with The Seattle Times*. For example, you might look at H1N1 coverage in the *Times* as well as in a nightly Seattle newscast. It's essential that your outlets are apples-to-apples comparisons (general market news, produced daily, serving Seattle). Don't shy away from this as "extra work" because being able to compare and contrast actually makes for an easier time when writing your paper.
6. Finally, bolster your arguments with scholarly research you may find in class handouts, your textbook, ethics journals, etc. (For example, "The Warren Commission's findings showed this was important because....") We'll talk more in class about finding scholarly sources.

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This includes only three components, but it's important to put a lot of thought into it. Be as detailed as possible. Your audit summary paper should include:

1. State your research question (or two).

Examples:

R1: How many times are women quoted as sources in business stories in *The Seattle Times*?

R2: When women are quoted, are they more often CEOs or low-level employees?

R1: Do the photographs on the front page of *The Seattle Times* represent the racial and ethnic makeup of the city?

2. Define your research domain

Examples:

Daily examination of every news story for use of the terms: "gay marriage," "marriage equality," "same-sex marriage," etc.

Daily examination of sport photographs to examine gender balance.

Daily examination of front page for stories involving people with disabilities.

3. Define your categories. It's important to think this through carefully ahead of time because having to go back and recode is a nightmare. Put thought into your categories and know your product. For example, if you want to look at coverage of high school girl's soccer, you should know that *The Seattle Times* does not feature extensive coverage of prep sports. You might need to redefine your domain and your categories.

If you are looking for uses of anonymous sources, break that into categories (i.e. "unnamed government official" versus "source close to the investigation" versus "an anonymous source.")

Categories may emerge as your study goes on. That's fine! It's called "ethnographic content analysis" and I'm a fan. Let the categories be what they are, rather than trying to shove them into tidy boxes.

I expect you to ask me questions along the way, so don't be shy.