



Poynter Kent State Media Ethics Workshop
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**Lesson Plans and Discussion Questions
to Accompany the Content of the Workshop**

By Trevor Ivan

**Graduate Assistant, Center for Scholastic Journalism
Kent State School of Journalism & Mass Communication**

Part 1 serves to prepare students to watch the streaming videos. Students are introduced to the concept of ethical decision-making skills through several activities, exercises and handouts. (Feel free to skip this if your students have been introduced to these concepts.) Then, they are given a series of questions for thought and discussion about ethical issues they might discover while watching the workshop videos.

Part 2 should be completed after viewing the online workshop content. At the end of each lesson in this part are additional discussion questions aimed toward college-level classes. High school teachers are encouraged to use them as well if they feel the questions are relevant to their students.

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PART 1

Ethics: What is the right thing to do?

Objectives and Rationale

Overview and Rationale

Laws tell reporters what they can and cannot do. Laws are a minimal standard journalists (and all people) must follow. Ethics, however, is a higher calling. Ethical thinking for journalists challenges them not to consider what they can do but rather what they should do in a given situation. Many in society criticize the media for acting in an unethical manner. The goal is to enable students to make ethical decisions based on consideration and discussion that can be justified if questioned.

Goals for Understanding

1. Laws dictate what citizens *can* do. Ethics asks them what they *should* do.
2. A proper sense of ethics is essential for all good journalists.
3. Journalists should consider the possible outcome when faced with an ethical decision.

Procedure

1. Start by asking the class this question: Is it OK to divulge a secret someone told you in confidence? Ask for opinions. If no one hits on it, take it a step further by asking this: Is it OK to divulge a secret if the person's life is in danger? Ex: This person told you her boyfriend is abusing her. Let the discussion lead where it may. Also ask the class about the person who told them the secret. How would she feel about revealing it? Does it matter? Feel free to introduce new "wrinkles" into this general scenario as it progresses. Students will have different opinions about this issue, and that's OK. Ask all the students who respond to the question to justify their response.

2. Tell students it's OK they differ in their opinions about this topic. That's expected. There is no law forbidding them from revealing the secret. They are *allowed* to do it. However, the question they are being asked to consider is *should* they do it. Ethical decisions are based upon what one feels is the right thing to do in a given situation. The stakes are high in any form of communication. People have the ability to do great harm if they are not careful. Being ethical doesn't mean shying away from controversial issues entirely. Rather, ethics demands reporters be accurate and fair to those they cover.

3. Distribute the table detailing the difference between law and ethics. As a class, fill in the blank squares on the table.

4. Distribute the Code of Ethics from the Society of Professional Journalists, which can be downloaded at <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>. The profession works to police itself so it can be more credible to readers. Before reviewing the code, distribute the packet titled "Making ethical decisions." The information here will help students recognize ethical issues and concerns they face when making decisions. Have them discuss the five ethical scenarios listed in the packet. You may want to assign one scenario per group. Discuss the results as a class.

LAW

ETHICS

Definition		
Created by...		
Possible Punishments		
Examples of violations/ concerns		

LAW

ETHICS

Definition	A code specifying certain actions as illegal. Laws tell citizens what they can and cannot do.	A sense of moral reasoning that asks people what they should do in given situation. Ethics looks at what's legal and asks whether we should do it, and if so, how should we do it?
Created by...	Generally created by legislatures that pass bills into law (ex: shoplifting is illegal). The Constitution is another source of law. It is the supreme law of the land in this country. The rulings of court cases are often used in similar cases to help determine the outcome. These generally have the force of law.	Ethics stems from a sense of moral reasoning. For some people, this includes their religious beliefs. For others, it's simply a sense of right versus wrong. Many media organizations follow codes of ethics to help guide their actions as they cover stories and deal with their sources.
Possible Punishments	Jail time (This isn't common for most media-related laws such as copyright and libel). An offended party usually sues the media organization. This is called a lawsuit. The punishment for the media organization, if found liable, usually involves paying damages, which could cost thousands of dollars.	Some reporters have lost their jobs for ethical violations. The deeper concern is the loss of credibility and respect from readers. Without these things, the news business is nothing.
Examples of violations/ concerns	In general: theft, murder, fraud In the media: libel, invasion of privacy, obscenity, copyright infringement and material disruption of the educational process of a school	Telling the truth/accountability to readers Harming someone's reputation Avoiding conflicts of interest Deception Anonymous sources

Making ethical decisions

Examples of Ethical Concerns

Conflicts of interest These occur whenever reporters face competing loyalties. If you cover student council and your best friend is president of student council, you may feel inclined to be less skeptical of the council's decisions because of your friendship. Your loyalty to your friend and to your readers is in conflict.

Deception Anytime you misrepresent yourself or your intentions to a source, ethical issues need to be considered. Sometimes this is the only way to get the information. Other times there are better alternatives.

Harming someone's reputation Thorough news reporting at times brings discomfort to those in power and those who are the subjects of stories. However, just because someone's life or reputation will be negatively affected doesn't mean you should look the other way when an injustice is occurring.

Anonymous sources You should always be as honest with readers as possible. Anonymous sources wrap key information about your story in a cloud of uncertainty. They should be used only in extreme circumstances (ex: the source's life may be in danger). Make sure to check with your editor before granting anonymity.

Accountability to readers Journalists hold others to high standards. They, too, must live by these high standards. Their first obligation should be to the truth. They should listen to readers who have complaints about coverage. They should correct errors promptly.

Things to Consider

- ✓ **What ethical concern(s) am I facing?**
- ✓ **Why am I writing this story?**
- ✓ **Who could be affected by this story? What concerns might those people have? (The audience is included.)**
- ✓ **How would I feel if I were one of those people?**
- ✓ **Do I need more information to make a decision?**
- ✓ **What are the possible outcomes of my decision?**
- ✓ **What alternative actions are there?**
- ✓ **Can I justify this decision to everyone involved? (To my audience, the sources, my boss/colleagues and myself)**

How would YOU solve these?

Ethics doesn't occur in a vacuum. The individual circumstances play a major role in determining your best course of action. For each scenario, answer the questions listed on the previous sheet.

Make a final conclusion about what you would do in each situation.

1. Your staff photographer attends a school basketball game. He brings back several great action shots. One of his best shots involves two players jumping for the ball, which was knocked out of the shot mere seconds before the photographer took the picture. He thinks the shot's visual appeal would be better with the basketball, so he just adds it in.
2. The staff is also writing an in-depth spread about teen dating. The photographer wants to take a picture of a couple kissing in the hallway. Public displays of affection are against school regulations.
3. A fellow student brings you credible information and proof that a recent student government election was rigged. The student who rigged the election in her own favor is a finalist for a prominent college scholarship. She would almost certainly lose the scholarship if anyone finds out.
4. The president of the school board was the Little League coach of the reporter assigned to cover the board this year. While they haven't remained in close contact since the reporter was in fifth grade, the reporter still considers his former coach to be a great influence on his life. After a meeting, the coach/president approaches the reporter to catch up on old times. He asks the reporter to focus only on positive coverage as the school is suffering from bad publicity due to a recent scandal.
5. A student comes to you, the editor of the paper, and said she went into the guidance office to request a copy of her transcript. She said she really doesn't know the secretary in that office. However, the secretary handed her the transcripts (filled with personal information) without asking for identification. Someone on your staff proposes you conduct a "sting operation" to see if this is a common practice. A reporter would enter and give the name of another student to see how easily the secretary would hand over the sensitive information.
6. A student in your school commits suicide. The student was prominent and well-liked. He was a star athlete and a stellar academic student. Everyone is in shock. One reporter wants to investigate his background to better understand why this student decided to end his life. Rumors also begin to fly that his home life was less than perfect. The reporter wants to discuss these allegations with his parents.

THINGS TO CONSIDER ABOUT “HOW WOULD YOU SOLVE THESE?”

1. Photo manipulation is generally unethical. It's OK to change things like color balance to make the photo clearer when published. However, it's NOT acceptable to add objects or take objects out to increase visual appeal. Photojournalists must be journalists before they are photographers. The photo, just like the printed word, must represent the truth. Many prominent photojournalists have lost their jobs after manipulating photos.

2. The photo involving the two students kissing could get them in trouble, depending on how strictly the policy is enforced. A feasible alternative would be to take the picture, but to distort the image by making it a silhouette. Make sure to mark the image a “photo illustration.” This lets the reader know the image doesn't represent reality as the photographer saw it, but rather it was created to illustrate a point. Anytime photos are posed to make things look a certain way, they must be marked as such.

3. If the information is proven true, it can't be libelous. That clears the legal hurdle. However, it's not ethical to allow someone to cheat (especially someone who has such a high position of power). The story could bring great harm and embarrassment not only to the student but to the school as well. The accused student should be given a chance to respond in the article if the staff decides to write one. It's important to be fair.

4. There is a definite conflict of interest here. The reporter (no matter how much he may deny it) is experiencing a conflicting loyalty between his job as a reporter and his loyalty to his former coach. It's also problematic when a reporter promises “good” coverage to a source. A journalist's job is to print the truth (good and bad). Reporters can promise sources they will be fair in coverage. Reporters should be willing to explain their journalistic purpose to a source whenever questioned.

5. Deception always raises ethical red flags. It's a last resort. The secretary may have recognized the student when she gave the records to her. One possible way to proceed may be to send a student into the office and ask for his/her own records to see what happens. This may help determine if a story exists. It's doubtful that a school secretary would egregiously hand out student records to anyone who asks. The story needs to be kept in proportion. It's wrong to sensationalize a story just to get a good headline. A headline telling of sensitive information falling into the hands of any student who asks for it may sell papers, but it certainly doesn't fairly represent the truth.

6. A story about the student's death seems justified. The occurrence has affected a great portion of the student body in some way or another. It's important to remember that people close to this student, especially his family, are experiencing great pain. While there is nothing a reporter can do to take that pain away, the reporter can take steps not to make that pain worse. It's necessary to call his family, but the reporter shouldn't push too hard, especially about unfounded rumors. Despite the student's prominence in the school, he and his family are still private individuals. Legally and ethically, the family is entitled to greater privacy than public figures. The goal here isn't to be an investigative reporter attempting to discover details that may be no one's business. The point is simply to remember the student who died.

Questions/points to ponder before viewing the workshop content

1. What role do news and information play in your daily life? How much time do you spend with the news (watching, reading, downloading)? How do you decide which information is credible? How does the news affect your perceptions of the world around you?
2. How much privacy do you think people have on the Web? Do Internet users, especially young people, understand the ramifications of what they post? How should journalists treat information they find online about others?
3. What values guide modern journalism? Do these values change in a digital environment? If so, how? What responsibilities do journalists have to their online audience?
4. The Internet provides ways for journalists to interact with their audience through comments on stories, discussion boards, blogs, social media and e-mail. What responsibilities do journalists have when interacting with their audience? How should journalists handle offensive or defamatory posts from viewers? Should audience members be allowed to post comments anonymously?
5. The news media are supposed to be a watchdog of the government. They check the power of government by illuminating wrongdoing and helping the public make sense of how society functions. Has the introduction of the Internet helped or hindered this goal? Explain.

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PART 2

Session 1 (Sense-Making), Keynote (Paul Steiger) and Session 6 (Arianna Huffington)

Goals: To understand how consumers use various media to consume news and information, to grasp how consumers interpret news from various sources

1. Ask students which sources they use to get their news (for instance, NPR, ABC, The New York Times, the local daily paper, etc.) Have them answer the following questions: Why do they use that source?

What are they looking for when using that source for news (i.e. local issues, world events, etc.)?

Do they compare information and stories from various media?

How do they decide which stories are important or worth their time?

2. Next, ask them which medium they use get their news (television, Internet, newspaper, social networks). Focus on the following questions:

Which medium is their primary source of news and information?

Why is that? Which factors influence their use of a primary medium?

3. Kelly McBride identified several types of news consumers. Which type do students classify themselves as? Why?

4. For all of the above questions, do students think their parents would answer differently? Why?

Pose the following questions to the class. This can be done as a full class, in smaller groups, or individually.

5. How do you define the concept of “credibility” in journalism? In your eyes, what qualities should journalism possess in order for it to be considered credible? What sets journalism apart from other mass media endeavors like entertainment?

6. Many polls indicate the general public is losing faith in the mainstream news media to deliver accurate information. This poll by Gallup is a recent example:

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/143267/distrust-media-edges-record-high.aspx>. Why do you think this is so?

7. What is the difference between “fact” and “opinion”? What qualities does each concept possess? Do people in today’s society understand the difference between the two?

8. As Kelly McBride noted, 31 percent of people seek news that conforms to or reinforces their own points of view. What effect can this have on people’s understanding of key events and issues?

9. Examine the website www.politifact.org. Look at some of the findings about various politicians and media pundits. Pay special attention to facts that the site has determined were wrong or blatantly misleading. Identify why certain statements were false based on the site’s verification process and how news consumers could be misled.

10. Journalists say they are pursuing the “truth.” But what does this mean? Especially given the intense climate of opinion and punditry masquerading as news, how can journalists better discover the truth?

11. What makes events newsworthy? Why should journalists devote their time to covering certain events or people? Consider the following examples:

http://articles.cnn.com/2009-10-18/us/colorado.balloon.investigation_1_richard-heene-mayumi-heene-hoax?_s=PM:US (balloon boy hoax)

http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504083_162-20017607-504083.html (Lindsay Lohan goes to jail)

Does either of these stories add to the public’s understanding of important issues? Contrast those with some of the investigations from ProPublica, which can be found at this link: <http://www.propublica.org/investigations/>

12. In conclusion, write a brief essay addressing one of the following topics.

A) What role do fact and opinion play in the practice of journalism? How can audiences be better trained to understand the difference? How do each contribute to discovering the truth?

B) What types of news interests students? How can journalists make news, events, and trends more relevant to young people? What media (Internet, newspaper, TV, etc.) should be employed to do this?

Additional questions:

1. How can audiences be better trained in media literacy, especially considering the overload of information that exists today among so many forms of media competing for everyone’s attention?

2. How does the prevalence of “entertainment news” affect society’s understanding of key issues and complex topics?

3. What advantages and disadvantages do online platforms offer to news and information consumers?

4. Do traditional ethics principles and values change in the online environment? If so, how? If not, why not? (Refer to Part 1 of this lesson plan for a discussion of ethics principles in journalism.)

Session 2 (Data mining)

1. Data and public records can be invaluable sources for many stories. Data analysis can lead to powerful reports that shed light on parts of society that may not function properly. Have students examine some of the investigations on ProPublica's website. Have them pay particular attention to this link that tracks how federal stimulus money is being spent <http://www.propublica.org/ion/stimulus>.

What role do data play in such a story? How do data affect the impact of the story that is reported? How would this investigation be different without the use of data?

2. Students must also consider the ethics of data use. Have them examine the site mentioned during the video <http://mugshots.tampabay.com/>. They should answer the following questions to create a stance on the usefulness and appropriateness of the website. Remember, all of the information found on this site is public record, meaning anyone could access this information from the sheriff's office. This site aggregates it into one place and elevates its existence before the public.

What purpose does it serve? Which specific parts could be useful?
Does this site do any harm? If so, to whom?
Does harm outweigh benefit?

Students should be able to create a well-reasoned argument about the purpose the site serves as well as its potential harm. They should reach a conclusion about whether the site, and others like it, should remain active.

3. Now students should apply these principles to their own school. Look for various forms of data on your state's department of education website about your school specifically or aggregate data about schools in your area or state. Ask students to consider how these data could be used during the reporting process to create stories about important issues.

For instance, if your state requires students to take standardized tests, it's often possible to find data about how individual schools scored on such tests. This could fuel stories that investigate a school's level of preparation for such exams.

Each state's department of education website and public records laws are different. See what you can find. This exercise is meant to be a starting point for students to consider using data in their reporting.

4. Finally students should be able to identify any ethical concerns such data reporting could involve. For instance, if students analyze data and other public information from the health department that provides evidence of violations in the school's cafeteria, what ethical considerations need to be addressed when writing that story?

Additional questions:

1. In a society where so much information about people is readily available online, what ethical responsibilities do journalists have to those they report about, especially if it involves information gathered from public records or other data-driven means?
2. What steps need to be taken for data to be placed in context in stories?

Session 3 (ONA panel—online comments)

Have students create a policy regarding online comments for a newspaper's website. If the class doesn't have a site, use this as an opportunity to begin thinking about one. The purpose here is for the class to articulate which values should underlie the creation of such a policy.

Based on the content of the session, have students address the following issues: Why is a policy important? What purpose does it serve? (These questions can be part of the policy's mission statement.)

Will commenters have to identify themselves by name on the site? By e-mail or some other screen name unique to the site?

What is the role of the moderator (someone on the publication staff who oversees the site)?

How will you handle offensive comments, especially those that degrade people on the basis of race, gender, religion, etc.?

How will you handle comments that contain libel or other forms of unprotected speech?

What criteria will you consider before removing a post? Who has the authority to do so?

How will you handle comments that contain links to other material? What responsibility does the staff have for the credibility of the linked material?

How will you handle comments that contain false statements?

To what extent will you protect the privacy of those commenting on stories?

Even if they don't write a formal policy, have them consider each of these questions in light of the panelists' discussion. Students should be able to justify their reasoning for their decisions. They should pay close attention to the ethical values they use to make each decision.

Below are some sample policies to help students think about these issues:

http://velonews.competitor.com/2010/07/news/velonews-com-revises-online-comments-policy_130078

<http://www.uaf.edu/aurora/comments/>

<http://www.cleveland.com/privacypolicy/>

Additional questions:

1. How do online comments affect the traditional role of public forum of the press? In other words, how does increased and easier reader interaction shape the press' ability to create a community dialogue about issues and trends?

2. As the panelists said, so many online comments devolve into hateful rhetoric based on ignorance and fear. How should journalists best balance the competing ethical values of the exchange of ideas with the need to maintain decorum in an effort to make the conversation purposeful?

Session 5 (Journalism and public relations online)

1. As was discussed in the video, journalism and public relations have different goals. The journalist seeks information about a wide range of topics and aims to serve the overall public interest. The public relations practitioner seeks to enhance his or her client's image with the public. Each profession relies on the other: Journalists receive story ideas from public relations professionals, and public relations professionals rely on journalists as a means to disseminate information about their clients.

Neither one "works for" the other. Rather, both groups understand that they each have different goals and they work together to achieve them.

Ethical decisions are important to both professions. As a starting point, have students examine the ethics codes of both the Society of Professional Journalists and the Public Relations Society of America. They can be found at these links:

<http://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/Ethics/CodeEnglish/>

<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

They should pay close attention to the similarities and differences between the two codes regarding the following issues:

Telling the Truth

Loyalty/Trust

Conflicts of Interest

Public's Welfare

2. It's also important to consider the inherent tension that can exist between the two professions and the ethical issues that can ensue. Watch the following video about BP's use of paid reporters to tell stories about the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico during the summer of 2010.

http://www.metacafe.com/watch/4858730/bp_hires_its_own_reporters_to_cover_oil_spill/

Students should pay attention to the following issues. Refer to the PRSA Code of Ethics to help answer these questions:

What message is the company trying to send to the public?

How should the company best tell its side of the story?

How should journalists use these reports in their reporting?

What information is absent from these stories that BP paid to have created?

Additional questions:

1. Some argue that public relations is stilted news coverage at best or propaganda at worst. However, what role does public relations play in the realm of communication?

2. Based on the ethical principles of the PRSA Code of Ethics, what steps should public relations professionals take to ensure adherence to the public good as well as that of their clients?