



Covering Violence in the Media

*This lesson plan can be used in journalism, English, ethics, media studies, and photography classes.

Overview and Rationale:

This lesson plan was created to complement the **Poynter KSU Media Ethics Workshop session titled “Telling Johanna’s Story.”** Part 1 serves as a pre-workshop lesson (to be completed either before attending the conference or before viewing the online workshop content), while Part 2 serves as a post-workshop lesson. Combined, the workshop and lesson plans can be used to lay a foundation for student journalists on how to cover violence and sensitive topics in the media, particularly focusing on what ethical considerations students should take into account when they face similar difficult stories.

Goals & Objectives for Learning:

- Students will become aware of the sensitive issues journalists encounter and the ethical dilemmas they face as a result.

Objective – After reading provided stories and watching the workshop session, students will be able to define trauma and discuss ways to professionally and sensitively cover traumatic stories.

- Students will learn key points in the ethical decision-making process and be able to work through ethical decisions using “Poynter’s 10 Questions to Make Good Ethical Decisions.”

Objective – Students will be able to explain the importance of using some sort of ethical decision-making process when faced with ethical dilemmas. They will be able to apply “Poynter’s 10 Questions to Make Good Ethical Decisions” to both practice ethical dilemmas and future real-world ethical dilemmas.

Essential Questions:

- What is my journalistic purpose in covering this story?
- Can this article/picture/video cause harm?
- What are possible ethical concerns?
- Can I clearly and fully justify my ethical decision?

Procedures:

PART 1 – Pre-workshop lesson (approx. 45 minutes)

Step 1: (10 min.)

READ & REFLECT

At the start of class, students will read the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics and highlight/underline the parts of the code of ethics that are relevant when journalists cover trauma and violence.

- Discuss as a class what students find relevant and why.

Step 2: (35 min.)

GROUP WORK

- Divide students into groups and have them read and review “Poynter’s 10 Questions to Make Good Ethical Decisions.”
- Assign ethical scenario (outlined below) and have students work through Poynter’s 10 Questions in groups. Be sure each group comes up with a clear decision to the ethical dilemma.
- Discuss as a class what each group decided and why.

Ethical scenario – The student publication you work for just received news of a tragic shooting of a student. The student was shot at her house by her boyfriend and her little sister saw it happen. She is in the hospital in critical condition and they are not sure she will survive. Your student publication staff needs to decide the following...

- Do we cover this story? If so, why? And whom do we interview?
- Do we release the victim’s name? The shooter’s name?
- Do we run any photos with the story?

*Remind students that there is no one right answer to these questions, and the most important thing is that they can clearly and fully justify their ethical decision.

PART 2 – Post-workshop lesson (approx.. 45 minutes)

Step 1: (30 min.)

THINK-PAIR-SHARE

Think about how reporter Rachel Dissell handled Johanna’s story and answer the following questions on a piece of paper (first students will reflect on these questions on their own on paper, then they will briefly discuss with a partner, then it should evolve into a whole class discussion).

Revisiting the Essential Questions...

- What was Rachel’s journalistic purpose in covering this story?
- Did the story (and pictures/video) have the ability to cause harm? If so, to whom?
- What were the ethical concerns Rachel faced with this story?
- Could Rachel clearly and fully justify her ethical decisions in covering this story? Do you agree with her decisions? Why or why not?

Step 2: (15 min.)

ESSAY REFLECTION

Students will individually reflect on this ethical dilemma in a 1-2 page essay. Have students take a stance and defend it...

Prompt - *Would you run a story in your student publication of a student who was shot? If not, why? If so, why and how would you cover it? Be specific.*

Assessment:

- Class discussion and participation
- Ethical reflection essay

Materials & Resources used:

- Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics - <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>
- Poynter's 10 Questions to Make Good Ethical Decisions - <http://www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/1750/ask-these-10-questions-to-make-good-ethical-decisions/>
- Rachel Dissell's original stories on Johanna and to the many follow stories since - <http://www.cleveland.com/johanna/>
- Poynter KSU Media Ethics Workshop video & content - <http://mediaethics.jmc.kent.edu/>