



Poynter Kent State Media Ethics Workshop
<http://mediaethics.jmc.kent.edu/2011/>
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**Lesson Plans and Discussion Questions
to Accompany the Content of the Workshop**

Created by Trevor Ivan
Graduate Assistant, Center for Scholastic Journalism
Kent State School of Journalism & Mass Communication

These lesson plans can serve as a supplement to the workshop content, which will be archived on the website following each session. Feel free to adapt them to meet your students' needs as well as time constraints.

Introduction to Ethical Decision Making

Rationale: Ethical decision making is a central feature of credible journalism. With every assignment, journalists must consider how their actions will affect those featured in their stories as well as the need and desire of the public for information.

Objectives:

1. To understand the importance of ethics in the practice of journalism.
2. To identify key ethical values in journalism.
3. To apply those values to given fact situations.

Procedures:

1. Show the segment “Sis, boom, bust: The high cost of college sports” from the PBS show “Need to Know.” The segment is about 15 minutes long.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/need-to-know/video/video-sis-boom-bust-the-high-cost-of-college-sports-2/11315/>

While students are watching, ask them to consider who the potential stakeholders are in this story. In other words, who is affected by the issue being discussed in the story (about the cost of collegiate athletic programs) and how? The goal is to look for multiple viewpoints and interests that various groups have about the same issue. (This can be assigned for homework the night before this lesson takes place.)

2. After viewing, discuss results. The students’ lists might include student athletes, university athletic departments, university administration, university faculty, other students who are not athletes, students who benefit from a university’s athletic program yet don’t participate directly (broadcast journalism students, those who study sports medicine, etc.), parents of students, taxpayers and fans. Each of these groups either has some role to play in the story or is affected by this issue.

Which stakeholders have competing interests? For instance, how does the students’ desire for affordable tuition square with the athletic department’s desire to find new sources of funding amid declining state aid? What other competing interests exist?

3. Every story has stakeholders, those with a vested interest in whatever issue is being presented. Ask the class what would happen if some of those stakeholders were not represented in the story. Gauge the students’ reaction.
4. Next, ask why the journalist chose to do this story. What purpose does it serve? Every story must have some purpose. Does the class think that the story is accurate? Does it provide representation for a wide range of viewpoints and issues? Are there some who might wish this story were not told at all?
5. Explain that each of the issues they’ve discussed so far is an example of ethical issues in reporting. Ethics deals with the way journalists treat both information and the people affected by the news. Laws dictate what people can and cannot do—for instance, in most places it’s legal to take photos of people and events that are taking

place in public. Ethics examines what journalists *should* do in a given situation. Newsgathering can have a profound impact on those affected by events. Journalists have a responsibility both to the public and those affected by the news.

Ethics can be complicated. Many decisions journalists face pit one value against another. For instance, it's right to want to inform the public as accurately and thoroughly as possible. However, it's also right to withhold photos that might cause undue harm or humiliation to those pictured. The journalist needs to make choices in these instances about which values are more important in that situation.

6. Distribute the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists, which can be found at <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>. Ask students to read and define the purpose of the code. What examples of ethical values can they find in the Code? For instance, truth is one value. Journalists should ascribe to finding the truth in all instances. Let them see if they can find others. They could do this in groups if time permits.

You can also introduce students to media ethics codes from other organizations as well: the Online News Association www.journalists.org/?page=codeofethics, the National Press Photographers Association http://www.nppa.org/professional_development/business_practices/ethics.html, the Radio and Television Digital News Association http://www.rtnda.org/pages/media_items/code-of-ethics-and-professional-conduct48.php, and the Associated Press Managing Editors <http://www.apme.com/?page=EthicsStatement>.

Beyond truth, other values embodied in the Code are independence (avoid conflicts of interest), transparency (avoid deception), accountability to the public and minimizing harm. Discuss each of these issues. Ask students if they can think of examples of when journalists didn't follow these principles. Also, what effect does it have on a journalist's credibility if he/she doesn't follow these ethical principles?

7. Next, it's important for students to understand the best practices for making ethical decisions. Distribute the handout "Making Ethical Decisions." The top part solidifies some of the values discussed when examining the SPJ Code. The bottom half introduces students to a list of questions that can help journalists as they face ethical questions in their reporting. The goal is to make decisions that are justifiable. In other words, a great deal of thought and consideration should go into each decision.

This introduction to ethical decision making will enable students to apply what they've learned in subsequent lessons.

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)**

Ethical Issues with Social Media in Sports

Rationale: Social media permeate today's communication landscape. Average people have greater access to social media through which to share opinion, commentary and information with others. Journalists are able to harness this increased potential for communication both to disseminate information and to interact with the general public. However, ethical pitfalls such as conflicts of interest, misrepresentation and inaccuracy abound.

Objectives:

1. To discuss the potential that social media play for communication, specifically in sports journalism.
2. To identify ethical issues that accompany social media use in sports journalism.

Procedure:

1. To begin, break the class into groups and ask them to consider how much social media they use each day. Specifically, they should focus on the following questions: Which social media outlets do they use? How much time during an average day do they spend with social media? With whom do they interact and for what purpose? Which platforms (computer, cell phone, etc.) do they use for social media interaction?

This short conversation should only take a few minutes, but it will serve to familiarize them with the topic. They can share some of their ideas with the entire class. The point is to recognize the prevalence of social media and its infiltration into daily activities, especially for younger people.

2. Next, what do social media mean for the news media? Ask the class if they or anyone they know gets news through social media. Show some examples of Facebook pages and Twitter feeds from both local and national news organizations. (This might require taking screen shots of these pages at home and displaying them for the class if your school's Internet filters block social media pages.)

What role do these sites play in providing information to the public? What benefits do they have? After the class compiles a short list, share this list with them from the University of North Carolina at Pembroke:

<http://www.uncp.edu/home/acurtis/Courses/ResourcesForCourses/SocialMediaJournalism.html>

3. Now, consider drawbacks. Remind the class of journalism's mission to inform and find the truth. What potential problems do social media pose for journalists who are seeking to find and disseminate truthful information? This is the beginning of the realization of the ethical dilemmas social media can pose for journalists.

As an example, share this article with the class about NPR's incorrect assertion that Rep. Gabrielle Giffords was killed during the shooting rampage in Tuscon in January 2011. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/ombudsman/2011/01/11/132812196/nprs->

[giffords-mistake-re-learning-the-lesson-of-checking-sources](#) How does disseminating false or misleading information affect a news outlet's credibility? What steps should be taken to correct mistakes? Are corrections enough, or has irreversible damage been done?

As a class, make a short list of the stakeholders in this story. How would each be affected by misinformation disseminated through social media?

4. Now, turn the conversation to sports journalism. Are the values of sports journalism the same as those of traditional journalism? If not, how and why do they differ? What's the purpose of sports journalism? Is sports reporting serious journalism, or merely the discussion of entertainment? Ask students to provide some examples to support their viewpoints.

What role do social media play for sports journalists? Ask students to find examples of blogs or other social media sites that discuss sports. What credibility do they have? How should one decipher credibility? What ethical values should sports bloggers possess to be seen as purveyors of credible information?

Taking this a step further, what role do comments from the audience play on sports blogs and other social media? Do they help or hinder the discussion? Ask students to analyze some of the comments they found on the social media sites they've discovered. In other words, how do audience input and interaction factor into the ethical questions if the information they post is false, misleading or hateful? This article discusses the potentially negative tone of reader comments and provides some context.

<http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2007/10/25/onlinecomments/>

5. Now examine these case studies and issues. These can be completed in groups or for homework. In each case, identify the ethical issue, the stakeholders and reach a conclusion about an appropriate course of action. Information in the links will provide points for further discussion when reaching conclusions.

A) How close should sports journalists be to the sources they cover?

<http://www.pastthepressbox.com/2011/02/articles/online-journalism/are-reporters-relationships-with-sources-ruining-sports-journalism/#more>

B) What level of care should journalists use to verify information on social media?

<http://www.pastthepressbox.com/2010/12/articles/online-journalism/fake-twitter-account-ken-rosenthai-gets-scoop-on-cliff-lee-to-phillies/>

C) Do sports journalists have conflicts of interest with sources?

http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/columns/story?columnist=schreiber_leann&id=2866241

6. As an assessment, ask students to examine ESPN's updated social media policy and to write a reaction paper discussing its merits and potential drawbacks. Does it help to mitigate potential ethical problems such as the ones they've discussed in class, or does it cause new issues? In other words, can a policy effectively regulate behavior in such a way as to solve ongoing dilemmas? A link to the policy can be found here: <http://socialtimes.com/next-on-espn-updated-social-media-guidelines b76097>

Sports Journalism and the “Spin Cycle”

Rationale: Sports is big business, both at the college and professional levels (and in some cases the high school level). Teams and the athletes themselves engage in rigorous marketing and public relations tactics to bolster themselves on the national stage. However, scandals and wrongdoings plague sports just like any other profession or pastime. Journalists often clash with agents and public relations practitioners to ferret out the truth amid the scandals.

Objectives:

1. To understand how marketing and public relations affect the sports industry.
2. To appreciate the ethical debates and dilemmas that accompany sports journalism.

Procedures:

1. To get students thinking, pose this question: If you served as agent for a well-known professional athlete, think of actions he/she could do that would paint him/her in a positive light among the public both on and off the playing field. Next, what types of actions both on and off the field could cause the public to hold the athlete in a negative light?

2. Every major athlete, team and university's image is carefully managed by a team of well-trained professionals who seek to market their clients and portray them in the best light possible. Why do students think this is the case? What happens when negative publicity or scandal affects a particular athlete or sports team?

3. It's important to consider the ethical issues present when reporting about sports scandals. In smaller groups, ask the class to examine these cases of scandals in sports. For each case, ask students to consider both how the scandal will affect the public perception of the athlete or team and the potential ethics issues that arise when journalists cover these types of stories. They should weigh a journalist's ethical values and the role of various stakeholders in each story. What happens off the court/field can have dire consequences that the public has a right to know. Share each group's results with the entire class.

A) Steroid use in baseball

<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2009/baseball/mlb/02/09/arod.admits/>

B) Personal, racy photos get leaked to the public

<http://sports.espn.go.com/mlb/news/story?id=4885546>

C) An athlete is accused of manslaughter

<http://sports.espn.go.com/nfl/news/story?id=4033632>

D) An athlete engages in illegal behavior

<http://sports.espn.go.com/nfl/news/story?id=2940065>