

CHOICES AND CONSEQUENCES: Ethics for Mass Communicators



Rolling Stone's editors sparked an ethical debate by illustrating a profile of Boston Marathon bombing suspect with a selfie that critics said glorified terrorism and made him look like a rock star. What would you have done?

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At a time when anyone with an internet connection can be a publisher and anyone with a Twitter account can report from the scene of a news event, what distinguishes professional communicators from the amateurs are the discipline, values and ethics that guide their work.

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

On a good day, those consequences align with the values of your profession: to tell true stories fully and fairly; 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 be asked to tell lies. Your actions may do actual harm to your subject, your community, your publication; your professional identity.

These are all ethical dilemmas. They are not easily resolved in absolute terms of right/wrong, black/white. The ethical landscape, in mass media and in life, is generally painted in shades of gray.

In this class you will:

- Learn to recognize ethical issues, evaluate them and make defensible decisions.
- Understand what it means to be an ethical journalist or public relations professional
- Develop a grounding in ethical theory that will enable you to navigate ethical in mass media and in life.
- Understand the structure and function of an ethics story -- and write one, if you're inclined.

Method

This class is all about reading, talking and writing. Using case studies and reporting on ethics in the news, seminar discussions will tackle a

broad range of issues, including:

- Who is a journalist?
- The escalating battle between whistleblowers, news media and government
- Objectivity, bias and the view from nowhere
- Editing images of terrorism and war
- Ethical use of social media
- The ethical public relations campaign
- Bearing witness to violence
- Conflicts of interest
- Fabricated news reports
- Reporting on sensitive subjects: sexual ethics, rape, abortion and suicide

Your obligations

- Co-lead an in-class discussion of case studies in media ethics.
- Write two 750-word decision papers analyzing case studies in media ethics.
- Ethics in action: ethical decision-making on deadline.
- A major project. Choose one:
 - Report and write an ethics story on the subject of your choice
 - Conduct an ethics analysis of a public relations campaign
 - Develop a model code of ethics for the Western Front, Klipsun or The Planet

Texts:

"The Ethical Journalist: Making Responsible Decisions in the Pursuit of News," by Gene Foreman. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

The New York Times Digital edition. [Sign up here](#) for a 13-week digital subscription for your computer and/or mobile device. Cost: \$17.87

[Columbia University Journalism School Case Studies in Media Ethics.](#) You can register [here](#). Two of the assigned case studies are free; two require minimal online payments.

[Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics](#)

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

[Reuters Handbook of Journalism](#)

Grading

Attendance: 100 points

Attendance is mandatory, 5 points per class attendance

Engagement: 100 points

- Study questions linked to assigned readings: 50 points
- Class participation: 50 points

Co-lead an in-class presentation and analysis of a case study or story of ethics in the news. **100** points

Write two 750-word essays analyzing case studies and/or ethics in the news @ 100 points each

Ethics in Action In-Class Exercise: 100 points (counts as your midterm exam)

Project of Your Choice: 300 points

- Analyze the ethics of two competing public relations campaigns
- Report, research and write an ethics on the subject of your choice
- Develop a model code of ethics for the Western Front, Klipsun or The Planet

This is a paper-free class:

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

Trust, Accuracy, Transparency and Fairness

Your grad on decision papers and ethical analyses 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. Following your gut instinct is not an option. What counts is the quality of your analysis, grounded in philosophical and historical perspective.

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

TurnItIn anti-plagiarism software may be employed to determine originality of content.

The ethics story, should you choose to write one, will test your ability to write clear and compelling journalism on an ethical issue, illustrated with relevant anecdotes, current research and quotes from experts. You will be graded on the thoroughness of your reporting and the quality of your writing.

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.

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

Academic honesty also involves respecting copyrights. Online case studies from the Columbia University Case Consortium must be purchased individually. Columbia tracks who is reading the free case studies and who has downloaded the two fee-based cases.

Course Syllabus



When *This American Life* host Ira Glass discovered a correspondent had fabricated a story, had a lot of explaining to do. A Columbia University case study evaluates the response.

Your Obligations:

- Attendance 100 points
- Co-lead an in-class presentation and analysis of a case study or ethics in the news. 50 points
- Answer study questions linked to assigned case studies 50 points
- Write two 750-word decision papers, analyzing case studies. 100 points each
- Ethics in Action In-Class Exercise: 100 points (counts as your midterm exam)
- Project of Your Choice: 300 points. Choose one of these options:
 - Analyze the ethics of two competing public relations campaign
 - Report, research and write an ethics story on the subject of your choice
 - Develop a model code of ethics for the Western Front, Klipsun or The Planet

This is a paper-free class

- All essays and projects should be filed electronically via word doc
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Here's a tentative class schedule, which provides a general overview of the quarter, assigned readings and due dates, including three special guest speakers.