Ethics of Journalism

Spring 2015

Instructor: Dr. Tom Johnson
Office: Belo 3.328
Phone: 232-3831
email: tom.johnson@austin.utexas.edu
Office Hours: MTTh 11-noon, by appointment and when you least expect
Class Time: TTh 9:30-11, CMA 3.130

Textbooks:


Additional, required reading will be posted on Canvas.

Overview:
This course is designed to help you think critically about the mass media by introducing you to some of the major moral issues that journalists face and to increase your ethical sensitivity to these issues. We will examine forms of ethical decision-making and moral philosophies to apply to these ethical issues.

Through class discussion, films, and journalistic writing such as editorials and analysis pieces, we will explore ethical issues in the media in some depth. We will explore true ethical dilemmas, those situations where there is no one clear right or wrong answer. We will consider what to do when values and loyalties conflict – when you can either tell the truth or protect someone’s privacy but not both, for example. Ethical questions in a variety of contexts will be considered – for example, how much information should the mass media provide about the private lives of public figures and private figures? Bring your own questions to class and we will explore those too.

We also will explore classical ethical theory from an applied perspective, where principles from classical ethical theory will be used as a framework to explore actions on specific journalism dilemmas. You will use these principles as foundations upon which to base your decisions, combined with professional values and principles, and your own internal moral compass.
These classical principles and professional codes will be brought together in the subject of moral development, or how one grows to become a moral adult.

In the course of this, you will learn about some famous journalism ethics cases from history by watching movies – Woodward & Bernstein’s coverage of Watergate in *All the President’s Men*, and the case of CBS and the tobacco whistle-blower incident in *The Insider*. *Absence of Malice* is fictitious, but the real test of libel is accurately portrayed in this movie along with a host of ethical dilemmas (most of them no-brainers). We will cover current ethical questions, such as the press’ role in the Edward Snowden NSA leaks, questions about publishing images of Mohammed in Charlie Hebdo and victims in Sandy Hook. As ethical questions occur throughout the semester (and they always do), we will take them up, altering our schedule as necessary. Please bring to class any ethics cases that you see happening!

**Course goals:**
At the end of this course you will:

- Know some of the major classical and contemporary ethical philosophies such as those of Aristotle, Kant, Mills, Rawls, and Bok and be able to apply those theories to practical ethical decision-making.
- Have gained some decision-making tools that will help you make more comprehensive and better quality decisions in your career and life.
- Understand how people grow and develop morally throughout their lives, and how and where journalists are situated in that spectrum.
- Understand the basic and specific ethical tenets of the journalism and mass communication professions and be able to apply them to real-life dilemmas.
- Have analyzed real-world ethical dilemmas and arrived at a course of action and justification for news audiences.

**Grading:**
The course grade will be based on the following:

- Four Written papers 60% (15% each)
- Midterm exam 20%
- Participation 20%
Graduate Credit: Professional master’s students will do one additional paper. Details will be discussed in class. It will be due anytime before the last day of class. The grading will be as follows:

Four Written papers 60% (15% each)
Additional graduate credit paper 5%
Midterm exam 20%
Participation 15%

ASSIGNMENTS

Reflection papers: Reflection papers topics are primarily linked to the readings and will be given the week before they are due. Reflection papers are due each Thursday the week they are due, except where indicated. The overarching goal of the reflection papers is for you to generate thoughtful insights about issues addressed in the chapter. The handout listed below provides more detail on how to do the reflection papers. For the first reflections paper write two double-spaced typed pages on an ethical dilemma, problem, or situation you have faced some time in your life that tested your own ethical values. Explain how you resolved it and why. How might you have handled it differently? This need not be connected to journalism. We will be talking about these papers in class, so do not write anything you are not willing to share with the class.

Writing assignments: You will apply what you have learned in class to work through the various issues in the situation to arrive at a compelling argument for (or against) the ethicality of a course of action. You will begin by using Bok’s decision-making model to work through one of the ethical choices in the film Absence of Malice, due Feb.17. Next, you will use the Potter Box to reason through one of the ethical decision in The Insider, due March 10. Finally, you will apply Bok’s ideas on lying to justify (or not) some action from All the President’s Men, due April 21. The last assignment is to produce, in conjunction with one other student, a presentation on some aspect of digital journalism. A short written paper will accompany your presentation. The presentation will be either May 5 or May 7 and the paper is due May 7. These will be due by 4:30 on the deadline specified.
Midterm exam: The midterm exam will involve definitions, multiple choice and some short-answer questions. The best way to prepare is to keep up with the readings and come to class. Trying to digest all this material right before the test is not a good plan. It takes some time to really ‘get’ these philosophies.

Participation: Participation is assessed in two related ways: By the reflection papers you write and by your contributions to class discussion. We will be using the reflection papers as the basis for discussion, so you need to bring the reflection papers to class in person. Do all of the readings before class and write a reflection paper related to the readings. Bring to class in person; do not email to me. I will not accept them by email, under my door, in my mailbox, by courier/friend or other delivery methods, or after class is over. This will help you come prepared for in-class discussion. Note: these two are linked; if you do not come to class, you cannot get participation points just by doing the readings and writing the paper but not showing up and contributing. There are 10 reflection papers; you are only required to do seven of your choice. So, there is already some leeway built in for being unable to attend all classes. All students will be expected to contribute to class discussion with insightful questions, informed opinions, and intelligent comments.

ATTENDANCE: I will allow you three unexcused absences. After the third absence, I will deduct half a letter grade for each additional absence. You need to contact me in advance if you are going to miss a class. You will be given an excused absence if you contact me before class. The test must be taken during its scheduled time unless you have made prior arrangements. Written assignments are due by 4:30 on the dates indicated, except for reflection papers that are due after the class discussion. I will deduct 10 percent for every day the assignment is late. I will not accept any papers more than a week late.

Religious Holy Days Observance Policy: The Texas Education Code specifies that an institution of higher education shall excuse a student from attending classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, including travel for that purpose. A student whose absence is excused under this subsection may not be penalized for that absence and shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment from which the student is
excused within a reasonable time after the absence. A student who misses classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day should inform the instructor as far in advance of the absence as possible, so arrangements can be made to complete an assignment within a reasonable time after the absence. http://www.utexas.edu/student/registrar/catalogs/gi03-04/ch4/ch4g.html#attendance

Students with Disabilities:
Please notify your instructor of any modification/adaptation you may require to accommodate a disability-related need. You will be requested to provide documentation to the Dean of Student's Office in order that the most appropriate accommodations can be determined. Specialized services are available on campus through Services for Students with Disabilities. http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssp/

Policy on Scholastic Dishonesty:
The University defines academic dishonesty as cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, falsifying academic records, and any act designed to avoid participating honestly in the learning process. Scholastic dishonesty also includes, but is not limited to, providing false or misleading information to receive a postponement or an extension on a test, quiz, or other assignment, and submission of essentially the same written assignment for two courses without the prior permission of the instructor. By accepting this syllabus, you have agreed to these guidelines and must adhere to them. Scholastic dishonesty damages both the student's learning experience and readiness for the future demands of a work-career. Students who violate University rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University. http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acint_student.php.

The Honor Code:
The core values of the University of Texas at Austin are learning, discovery, freedom, leadership, individual opportunity, and responsibility. Each member of the University is expected to uphold these values through integrity, honesty, fairness, and respect toward peers and community.

Cell Phones
Few things are more annoying than a cell phone going off during class, so be sure to turn them off before class. I will try to remember too. I also do not
want to see them out, as texting during class is distracting to me and the students around you.

**Laptops**
I encourage you to bring your laptops to class. I post the powerpoints online before class and I encourage you to download them and to take notes on the lectures. I cannot police you to see if you are taking notes or updating your Facebook page. Those who pay attention to class, however, perform better. If you are disrupting the class with your laptop use, you will be asked to put

**A word about writing:** Ethics, more than most subjects, demands clear, thoughtful communication. The course contains a large element of logic, which is appropriate because formal ethical theory springs from the logical traditions of philosophy. Grades will be based on rigorous thought, coherent argument, and use of understandable language. Doing ethics relies heavily on critical thinking, and your written work will be judged on your ability to think critically via your expression of those thoughts.

I am happy to help you in any way I can. I want each of you to do your best in this class, learn something interesting you never knew before, and even have FUN!
Schedule Spring 2015*

*This schedule is subject to change. Dates for the exams and assignments may change depending on progress of the class. Readings should be completed before the class for which they are assigned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Assignments</th>
<th>Readings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jan. 20 and 22</td>
<td>Introduction Defining Ethics</td>
<td>Reflection paper 1 – your own personal dilemma due Jan. 27</td>
<td>Patterson Ch. 1 (intro to ethical decision making) &amp; pp. 119-120 (Rawls); Mill, Aristotle’s Golden Mean, W. D. Ross readings on Canvas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jan. 27 and 29</td>
<td>Personal dilemmas discussion</td>
<td>Reflection paper 1 due Jan. 27</td>
<td>Patterson Pgs. 5-7; Bok Ch. 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Classical ethical theory</td>
<td></td>
<td>Patterson Ch. 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Look at ethical codes on Canvas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Feb. 3 and 5</td>
<td>Decision-making models; Bok’s model</td>
<td>Reflection paper 2 due Feb. 5 (applying ethics)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Applying ethics to journalism</td>
<td>1st essay on Absence of Malice due Feb. 17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Codes of Ethics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
<td>Discussion/Reading</td>
<td>Due Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Feb. 10</td>
<td>Film: Absence of Malice</td>
<td>With discussion at end</td>
<td>Feb. 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And 12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Feb. 17</td>
<td>Moral development</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; paper on Absence of Malice due Feb. 17</td>
<td>Feb. 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And Feb. 19</td>
<td>Potter Box</td>
<td>Reflection paper 3 on Ch. 11 (Moral Adult) &amp; readings due Feb. 19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict of Interest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Patterson Ch. 11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Readings on Canvas — Moral Development, Moral reading &amp; Development stages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Potter Box—Patterson pp 86-89</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict of interest reading on Canvas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Feb. 24</td>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>Reflection paper 4 on Ch. 4 (loyalty) Due Feb. 26</td>
<td>Feb. 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Feb. 26</td>
<td>Privacy and Taste</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Film: The Insider</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Patterson Ch. 4 (loyalty)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Patterson Ch. 5 (privacy)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mar. 3</td>
<td>Watch and Discuss The Insider</td>
<td>Reflection paper 5 on Ch. 5 (privacy) Due March 5</td>
<td>Mar. 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And Mar. 5</td>
<td>(MY BIRTHDAY!!)</td>
<td>Insider Paper Due March 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week</td>
<td>Dates</td>
<td>Course Content</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 8    | Mar. 10 and March 12 | Visual Journalism  
Race and Diversity  
Insider Paper Due March 10  
Reflection paper 6 on Beyond Diversity or the Politics of Hate Due Mar. 12  
Patterson Ch. 8  
Canvas readings: “Beyond Diversity and Journalism” and “The Politics of Hate” |
| 9    | Mar. 17 and Mar. 19 | Spring Break – No Class—WOO HOO!  
Patterson Ch. 6 |
| 10   | Mar. 24 and March 26 | Journalism in a Democracy  
Midterm Exam March 26  
Reflection paper 7 on Ch. 6 (Due March 24)  
Patterson Ch. 6 |
| 11   | Apr. 7 and Apr. 9 | Review Exam  
Investigative Reporting  
Lying 1  
3rd paper on All the President’s Men (Due Apr. 21)  
Reflection Paper 8 on Lying chapter due April 9  
Bok 1-6 & 8  
Custodians of Conscience (on Canvas) |
| 12   | Apr. 14 and Apr. 15 | Watch and Discuss All the President’s Men  
Group project on digital journalism  
Group project presentation on digital journalism due May 7 |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Assigned</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Apr. 21 and 23</td>
<td>Lying-II Public Relations Ethics</td>
<td>3rd paper on All the Men due April 21 Reflection Paper 9, TARES test Due April 23 Bok, ch. 9-12 TARES test reading &amp; handout, on Canvas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Apr. 28 and Apr. 30</td>
<td>Ethics and Digital Journalism</td>
<td>Reflection Paper 10 on Ch. 9 New Media Due April 30 Patterson Ch. 9 (New Media)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>May 5 and May 7</td>
<td>Ethics and Digital Journalism (class presentations)</td>
<td>Digital journalism Paper due May 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Reflection Papers**

On selected assigned readings, I will ask you to write a one-page “reflection paper” that analyzes or synthesizes some idea(s) in the readings.

There is a great amount of latitude in what you write about for your reflection paper; however, the overarching goal is for you to generate thoughtful insights about the readings. It should not be a factual question, rather, these papers should be about the issues raised by the readings. You may go beyond the specifics of the reading to offer a case you know about to argue a point or bring up related issues that were left out of the text. Write about something that happened to you. Write about what you questioned as you read the text. You may combine topics from two or more readings, if there is more than one, or concentrate on a specific part of one article. Write about how you agree or disagree with something in the article, or think that it is BS and why. What did you still wonder about and why?

It should not just be a single thought or question per se, but should be elaborated upon with your thoughts on why this is important or unresolved by the readings. Flesh out why you think this is an important issue. Give us background information or tell us something we didn’t learn from reading the text. Expand on the idea so that you have written at least one double-spaced page. Think of it as a short “discussion question” that expands your critical thinking as higher education is supposed to do. No idea is too outlandish if well supported.

These papers will be graded on quality, with more points awarded for the most thought-provoking writings.

**PERSONAL DILEMMA:** For the first Reflection Paper, you will not write about the readings, but about an ethical dilemma that you have personally faced. This assignment will be two double-spaced typed pages. Write about an ethical dilemma, problem, or situation you have faced some time in your life that tested your own ethical values. Explain how you resolved it and why. How might you have handled it differently? What values were in conflict (e.g.: tell the truth or prevent harm)? To whom did you feel a duty or loyalty to? It can be something you are grappling with now, or something that happened in the past. This does not need to be connected to journalism. Do not write anything you are not willing to share with the class.
Absence of Malice Essay

Due: Feb. 17

Select and write in detail about one of the ethical issues in Absence of Malice. Apply Bok’s Three-step Model as a framework for your reasoning:

1. Consult your own conscience. How do you feel about the action?
2. Seek expert advice and explore alternatives. For the first part of this, you will need to apply at least two principles from ethical theory. Do not just describe them generally, but relate them specifically to the issues in this case. Don’t forget the second part – explore alternatives. What else could the character have done that would have been more ethical?
3. Conduct a public discussion with the parties involved. For an example of how to do this, see the textbook. Be sure to cover all the major players. For this part, you will need to play Devil’s Advocate and argue against your own position.
4. Finally, briefly explain what you would do and why.

Length: 3-4 pages.

Do not take up a lot of space describing the events in the movie; I watched it too. You will need to get to the point, explain things succinctly, and write clearly and concisely. Concentrate on demonstrating the rigorous thought you have given this topic and making coherent arguments in clear, understandable language. Unorganized thoughts, wandering writing, and generally poor communication will count against you. Spelling and grammar, sentence fragments and sentences that don’t make sense to me also will count against you.

Typed, double-spaced, 1-inch margins.
The Insider Assignment

DUE: March 10

This is the same kind of assignment as you did for Absence of Malice, only this time we will use the Potter Box as the framework, and the movie The Insider. Choose some ethical dilemma that you see one of the characters in the movie (a real story) make a decision about. Write about one decision, in depth. For example, you can write about Lowell Bergman’s manipulation of Jeffrey Weigand. Or you may focus on one of the other journalists such as Lowell Bergman, Mike Wallace, or Don Hewitt. You may even focus on the major character in the film, a non-journalist, Jeffrey Weigand, for example, should he have cooperated with the Mississippi attorney general or not?

Apply the Potter Box as a framework for your reasoning:

5. Outline the pertinent facts.
6. Describe the most important values you considered and explain what values conflicted and why you chose the values you did.
7. Apply at least two principles from ethical theory to this particular case. “Apply” means to relate them specifically to the issues in the case, not just describe the principles generally.
8. Define your loyalties. Describe to whom and what you are loyal, where your allegiances lie, and which are in conflict. Be honest here and describe even your less lofty loyalties.

As always, I expect you to think deeply and critically, to apply what you have learned, and to analyze and synthesize statements and actions in this movie using ethical philosophy and the Potter Box. Also incorporate other things you have learned, from the readings on conflict of interest, privacy and loyalty, for example. Read ahead if you need to.

You will need to get to the point, explain things succinctly, and write clearly and concisely. Concentrate on demonstrating the rigorous thought you have given this topic and making coherent arguments in clear, understandable language. Unorganized thoughts, wandering writing, and generally poor communication will count against you. Spelling and grammar, sentence fragments and sentences that don’t make sense to me also will count against you.

3-4 pages

Typed, double-spaced, 1-inch margins.
The President’s Men Essay

DUE: April 21

For this assignment, you will need to apply specific arguments in Bok’s book “Lying” as the basis for either approving or disapproving of the actions of the character(s) in the film *All the President’s Men*. Not all of the actions of all of the characters, obviously; as always, choose the one or two you feel are the most important. Focus on one character or choose 1 or 2 actions or a pattern of behavior to discuss and do each one in depth rather than giving superficial treatment to more.

Analyze these actions and statements using Bok’s chapter topics; for example, does what she says in the chapter on “Lies for the Public Good” to justify the deception that Woodward and Bernstein used on their sources, telling them, for example, that they already had a source who said something and they just needed confirmation when that was not the case? Would this pass muster with Bok under one of her topics? What about lying to enemies or to protect a source? What would Bok say about lies in a crisis, for example, when Deep Throat told Woodward and Bernstein their lives were in danger? Or when Bradlee told them the future of the press and democracy was at stake? According to Bok, would that justify lying or deception? What would she say about white lies when Bernstein tricks the secretary who won’t let him in to see the source? Was it OK for him to do this under her views of white lies? Not a lot of actual lying occurs in this film, it is more like deception; therefore, you can use circumstances that more closely fit the description of deception, manipulation, lies of omission, or when a lie could have occurred, but the character chose the truth instead. Also draw from the chapter in Custodians of Conscience, which talked about denial and irony, in your essay. Where do you see the concepts discussed in this chapter appear in the film?

Your argument should not be simplistically “for” or “against” a given statement or action. Nuance, where it is called for, is encouraged. As always, I expect you to think deeply and critically, to apply what you have learned, and to analyze and synthesize statements and actions in this movie using ethical philosophy and Bok’s work on lying, and Custodians of Conscience. A simple list of statements/actions and then linking them to one of her chapters with no attempt to analyze and synthesize, understand or explain will not pass muster.

You will need to get to the point, explain things succinctly, and write clearly
and concisely. Concentrate on demonstrating the rigorous thought you have given this topic and making coherent arguments in clear, understandable language. Unorganized thoughts, wandering writing, and generally poor communication will count against you. Spelling and grammar, sentence fragments and sentences that don’t make sense to me also will count against you.

3-4 pages, typed, double-spaced, 1-inch margins.
Digital Journalism Ethics Group Project

Due: May 7, 2014

By now you are probably tired of watching movies, writing all those papers and listening to me talk, so this is a group project where YOU (2 of you, actually) will educate me and the rest of the class on some cutting edge topic related to the ethics of digital journalism. Select a partner in class and decide on a topic. Clear your topic and partner with me as soon as possible and no later than 4 days after this assignment is given out (by email is fine). You will have 2 weeks to prepare information and a presentation, which you will give on the last week of class. It should be 10-12 minutes long, accompanied by a 3-4 page paper. Each of you should submit a paper. You must work with a partner; this assignment is designed to foster collaboration, as that is an important component of making good ethical decisions in newsroom settings.

Some topics of concern to journalists in the digital environment include social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.), blogging, and linking to external sites. For example, links raise the issues of whether you are responsible for the accuracy of the information linked to, whether to include links with opposing viewpoints, and linking to material that violates your own standards.

Social media questions include how should journalists use Facebook and Twitter as sources, and also whether journalists should have their own Facebook and Twitter sites, and what they should be allowed to include on them, and how, if ever, should fake Twitter followers be used.

Blog issues might include whether objective journalists should write their opinions in blogs and how that affect their credibility in their news stories, whether journalists should be allowed an online ‘voice’, if reporters should blog anonymously or use pseudonyms, and how reporters should cite blog sources, including telling the blogger about the use of their words.

These are just some of the ethical concerns with digital journalism; you are free to raise others. Come up with something novel, interesting, and important. Pick one focused topic of concern to you and others about digital journalism. Then explore the ethical implications (good and bad) as it relates to journalism and write a “best practices” position paper for your (hypothetical) newsroom. In addition to laying out the pros and cons of the various practices, you should examine the ethical issues. Explain why you
view a particular practice as ethical or not, using your own logic as well as guidance from what you have learned about ethics in this course. For example, consider those to whom journalists owe a duty. Finally, offer some guidelines for the ethical use of one of these practices that journalists can use in their work.

In addition to your usual fine writing, you will need to give an engaging and interesting, as well as time-limited, presentation. Use graphics and examples to make it interesting and real-world.

**Paper 3-4 pages**  
**Presentation 10-12 minutes and will be done either May 5 or May 7**