

Comic books in the classroom? Maybe for a course in popular culture, politics or art illustration but in an ethics class?

Yes!

A series of comic books written, drawn and published by MED's Tom Bivins presents basic theory and well-known philosophers in a comic magazine format using clever characters, straightforward text and a liberal sprinkling of "wisdom" from Mark Twain.

Bivins is the John L. Hulteng (**CQ**) Chair in Media Ethics in the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon in Eugene. He is the head of the communication studies major and the graduate certificate program in communication ethics.

Before academia, Bivins worked in radio, television, advertising, public relations, and as a graphic designer and editorial cartoonist. He never lost the creative urge from his days as a cartoonist in Alaska, so he started writing and drawing the ethics comics three years ago to encourage student interest and participation.

"My lectures and my comic books are my creative outlet; I couldn't do a straight lecture because it isn't me," Bivins says. "If I couldn't use humor and crack jokes it wouldn't be me."

Now the comics are a staple in Bivins's classes along with a textbook\* he wrote. The ethics comics – 13 so far – are a backup to Bivins's lectures.

"If a student misses a lecture he can go to the comics and get everything. They're also a good way to study because everything (covered in class) is there," Bivins says.

And what *is* there, exactly?

First in the series is an eight-page magazine titled "The Story of Ethics, How the media got moral, or not," which covers basic terms, definitions and the difference between normative, applied and metaethics. The introduction is accurate and easy-to-understand. Each page includes delightful, and thoughtful, cartoon illustrations. At the end, Bivins's favorite character, Mark Twain, sums things up with a quote.

"I've always been a huge fan of Mark Twain," Bivins says. "I just like the way he's able to say something serious with humor, especially about ethics."

Additional ethics comic books focus on topics such as Media and Democracy, Duty-Based Theory, Consequential Theory, Virtue Ethics, Privacy and more. Each comic book features an original cover illustration; inside the ethics topics are covered in a succinct, yet humorous, way.

Bivins says the ethics content is compiled from many sources, including encyclopedias and clips. He double-checks everything for accuracy and makes corrections when things rendered in comic book form don't make sense to him.

The actual illustrations take some time, Bivins says. He draws most of the covers by hand and does the coloring and shading in Painter and PhotoShop computer programs. Bivins designs the comic books with Apple software. Bivins's brother, Chris, a graphic designer and artist, drew the cover for the comic book on Media and Harm.

Illustrating and writing the ethics comic books takes time but Bivins says he'll add more to the collection. He started with five or six comic books during summer break

three years ago and has added two or three each summer since, including new ones featuring John Stuart Mill and Thomas Hobbes that were created just last year.

He also produced the ethics comic book on relativism last summer. It features an image of Albert Einstein wearing a rumpled blue sweater with a big yellow “P,” for Princeton, on the front of the sweater.

Bivins wants to do three or four more ethics comic books focusing on advertising ethics, morally offensive content and other topics.

For now, though, the ethics comic books are popular with Bivins’s students and Bivins is happy to share them with MED members. Find Tom Bivins’s media ethics comic books at his course website:

<http://j397mediaethics.weebly.com/index.html>

The ethics comic books themselves are at:

<http://j397mediaethics.weebly.com/ethics-comics.html>

Or contact Bivins at [tbivins@uoregon.edu](mailto:tbivins@uoregon.edu).

### **BIOGRAPHY/SIDEBAR for Tom Bivins (*from Tom*)**

Tom Bivins is the John L. Hulteng Chair in Media Ethics in the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon, Eugene, where he is the head of the Communication Studies Major and Graduate Certificate Program in Communication Ethics.

He has a BA in English and an MFA in Creative Writing, both from the University of Alaska, Anchorage, and a Ph.D in Telecommunications from the University of Oregon. He has worked in television and radio broadcasting, documentary film production, advertising, corporate public relations, and as a graphic designer and editorial cartoonist.

He is the author of numerous articles on the mass media in academic and professional publications, and has written books on media ethics, public relations writing, publication design, advertising, and newsletter publication. He has three published children’s books and a small book of poetry. He has also designed numerous web sites for education, business, and professional societies.

### **TEXTBOOK INFO**

Mixed Media: Moral Distinctions in Advertising, Public Relations and Journalism, by Tom Bivins, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Lawrence Earlbaum Associates, 2009.