

Journalism Ethics in the Real World

Assignment at a Glance

- **Interview a working journalist of your choice about his/her real-world ethical decision-making.**
- **No doubling up – only one student per journalist.**
- **No student journalist interviewees.**
- **The interview must be audio-recorded, and the audio file, as well as the journalist's complete contact information (phone number/s and email address/es), must be submitted with your report.**
- **Your final report will discuss:**
 - ✓ **The types of journalism ethics dilemmas your interviewee most often encounters**
 - ✓ **One recent journalism ethical dilemma your interviewee has faced**
 - ✓ **One or two of the most difficult ethical dilemmas your interviewee has experienced**
 - ✓ **YOUR analysis of your interviewee's ethical decision-making style & success**
 - ✓ **YOUR recommendations for how your interviewee and his/her publication/broadcast outlet could improve their ethical decision-making**
- **Due Date – Nov. 23**
- **Earn up to 5 extra percentage points by turning your paper in early!**

Learning about journalism ethics in the classroom will help prepare you for making better ethical decision as a working journalist. But it also can be very helpful to learn how journalists already working at newspapers, magazines, online publications or in the broadcast media deal with ethical quandaries. This project will help you learn what kinds of ethical dilemmas you'd be most likely to encounter as a journalist and give you some practice evaluating the ethical decision-making of a working journalist. You'll also learn something about the norms of journalists doing the kind of work you hope to do. (That's not to say that these norms will *always* be admirable or that you should necessarily adopt them.)

The choice of journalist to interview is (mostly) up to you, but you must identify your interviewee early in the semester, make contact with him or her and let me know when he/she has agreed to the interview. There are still thousands of working journalists out there, so there's

no reason each of you can't identify a different person. If two students choose the same journalist, the first one who gets the journalist to agree to an interview will have that individual. The other student will have to find an alternative interviewee. The best way to document that you've obtained the journalist's agreement to be interviewed is to have him/her email you and either copy me (kwchilders@jou.ufl.edu) on the email or forward the email to me. I'll also set up a space on the e-learning site where students' interviewees are listed, so that before you contact a journalist, you can see whether he/she already has agreed to talk to another student.

You may NOT interview other student journalists, no matter how many internships they may have had nor where they work. I would encourage you to select a journalist whose work you're at least somewhat familiar with, ideally someone doing the kind of work you hope to do when you graduate. So if you're a photojournalism major, choose a photojournalist. If you're a magazine major, see if you can interview an editor at the magazine for which you'd most like to work. Keep in mind that you probably won't start out as the top editor, so it might make sense to interview an assistant editor. You also can select someone from your hometown newspaper or television station. Do keep in mind that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of Gator journalists out there. (The Gator Nation is everywhere, right?) Don't hesitate to ask alumni to help you out. Guest speakers who've appeared in previous classes are also good possibilities, but remember that many other students are likely to think of those same people, so you'll have to be fast – and possibly lucky – to get them.

Your interview must be conducted in person or over the telephone (or Skype, if that's an option for the person you choose to interview.) You will be required to submit an audio recording of the interview to get credit for the report, so please do NOT ask your interviewee to answer questions via email, Facebook chat or in any other written form. The quality of the audio file is not particularly important, so long as I can hear you and the journalist interviewee, but to ensure that you're complying with Florida law, it MUST include the interviewee's verbal statement that he/she understands that you're recording the interview.

The Interview

Ask your interviewee to mail or email to you a resumé or biographical sketch so you'll know a bit about him/her before you do the interview. Here's a suggested format for the interview, though you should feel totally free to modify the questions to fit the flow of the interview:

1. Where did your interviewee attend college? What was his/her major, and if it wasn't journalism, how did he/she end up being a journalist? Did he/she have any kind of ethics training as a student? Has he/she attended any sort of ethics training programs since he/she started working as a journalist?
2. What kinds of ethical dilemmas does your interviewee most often encounter in his/her work? How does he/she typically decide what to do? The point here is to get your interviewee to tell you about the process he or she goes through, what gets considered and what factors have the greatest impact on his/her decision.

3. Does your interviewee's publication or broadcast outlet have an ethics code? Does he/she consult that code for help in making ethical decisions? Do most of his/her co-workers know about and use the code?
4. Ask your interviewee to tell you about one specific ethical decision (in journalism) he or she has had to make recently, and get him or her to talk about what he/she (or the publication/broadcast outlet) ultimately did and why.
5. Have your interviewee recount for you the most difficult ethical dilemma (or two) he/she has faced as a working journalist. What exactly was the dilemma? What alternative actions/decisions did he/she consider (or what alternative actions were available, even if he/she did not give those choices much consideration)? Whose advice did he/she ask? Once he/she identified that there was an ethical dilemma, did he/she consult any non-journalist experts for information that might help him/her come up with alternative solutions? How did he/she come to a decision about what to do? Is that what actually happened, or did his/her publication/broadcast outlet do something that differed from what the interviewee believed was the correct choice? What were the short- and long-term consequences of that decision? If he/she had the chance for a "do-over" on that situation, what would he/she do now? Would he/she do anything differently? How, if at all, did that experience affect how she/he works now? In other words, what did he/she learn about ethical decision-making in journalism from that experience? (Getting the interviewee to talk about more than one tough decision will make it easier for you to write up your analysis of his/her ethical decision-making style.)

A few interview tips

- Make CERTAIN you can audio-record the interview. You MUST turn in an audio file with your final report.
- Make CERTAIN the audio file includes your interviewee stating that he/she understands that you're recording the interview and agrees to have the interview recorded.
- Try to arrange to conduct your interview at a time when your interviewee is less likely to be interrupted by the telephone and when he/she has enough time. It's likely to take 45 minutes to an hour to get a good, complete interview.
- If the interviewee asks, your final report should be considered school work, not journalism. That means it shouldn't be subject to subpoena, according to Prof. Sandra Chance, director of our Brechner Center for Freedom of Information.
- The ANALYSIS part of your final paper will require you to determine whether your interviewee uses primarily gut-level or rule-based decision-making or engages in ethical reasoning and what type of ethical system (duty-based versus consequence-based) he/she uses. So the more you can get him/her to address these issues in the interview, the easier it'll be for you to complete your analysis/evaluation.

The final report

A. Your interviewee's ethical experiences

This section can follow the interview format described above. Tell us where your interviewee came from, how he/she got into journalism and what kind of journalism he/she has done, what kinds of ethical decisions he/she faces most often, etc.

Spend some time describing in detail the KEY ethical dilemmas your interviewee discussed with you. Tell us as much as possible about the situation, the alternatives that were available to the journalist, especially alternative decisions he/she considered, and the process the interviewee went through in deciding what he/she believed was the right choice. Explain what sorts of constraints he/she had to deal with, such as not having all the information he/she needed, not having the authority/autonomy to make certain decisions, competition from other journalistic outlets (or from non-journalistic sources such as bloggers), time pressures, constraints on resources available for further research, etc. Discuss any other factors that seem to have affected the interviewee's decisions, such as inexperience, the traumatic nature of the situation (e.g., for a photojournalist covering a horrific crime or accident scene), lack of familiarity with the culture of those he/she was covering, etc.

For each of the major ethical decisions your interviewee discussed, describe alternative actions you believe your interviewee or his/her publication/broadcast outlet could have taken that would have resulted in a more ethically justifiable outcome (if such actions exist). Make sure you explain WHY the alternative actions would have produced a better outcome and WHY those actions would have been more ethically justifiable

B. Your interviewee's ethical decision-making style

In this section, you're going to evaluate/analyze your interviewee's ethical decision-making. Keep in mind that he/she will not be reading this, so you're under no obligation to "be nice." Even if your interviewee was very gracious and helpful to you, it's possible that his/her ethical decision-making leaves something to be desired. If so, you should say so.

1. Does your interviewee typically make ethical decisions based on gut-level reaction, following company policy or his/her own rules/habits/traditions, or on ethical reasoning? If you argue that he/she engages in ethical reasoning, make sure you explain the process he/she goes through to make ethical decisions and why this should be considered ethical reasoning.
2. What is your interviewee's ethical decision-making style? Is it based primarily on duty, and if so, what duties does your interviewee prioritize in making decisions? Or is it based primarily on consequences, and if so, what types of consequences does he/she give the greatest consideration?
3. For whose interests does your interviewee show the greatest concern? In your opinion, are there other groups or types of individuals whose needs/interests your interviewee *should* take into consideration more?
4. If you were asked to serve as an ethical adviser to your interviewee or to his/her publication/broadcast outlet, what recommendations would you make about how they could make better ethical decisions? Keep in mind that your suggestions must be reasonable – for instance, a small newspaper or magazine can't afford to hire a full-time ombudsperson or to

send its full staff to a Poynter Institute ethics seminar every year. However, you needn't let pragmatism rule entirely. The fact that a publication has ALWAYS done something in a particular way should not mean that they CAN'T change, and journalists need not allow their own ethical decisions to be affected by whether or not their competitors might make less ethically strict decisions.