

MEDIA ETHICS & ISSUES

JTC 411

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COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course is designed as an introduction to the general field of media ethics, with more specific focus on journalism ethics. In it, we will examine some key issues confronting journalists and their audiences as well as those of advertisers, marketers and public-relations practitioners. As our media culture becomes increasingly pervasive and complex, it is critical that we understand how to conduct ethical deliberations and move beyond mere “gut reactions,” status quo defenses and simple claims of conscience. Those who come seeking a rule book to guide their conduct as media workers will be disappointed here. This is a class that will deal largely with questions as well as strategies to strengthen your ethical decision-making.

The primary goal of this course is to help prepare you to grapple with the ethical dilemmas you will inevitably confront in your professional careers and private lives. There are other goals:

- ❑ To develop a deeper understanding of the news media and of the many forces – political, social, economic and technological – that shape what we see in the media and what we don’t see.
- ❑ To develop a basic grasp of the principles and concepts used by key philosophers.
- ❑ To develop a rational, systematic way of analyzing ethical problems.
- ❑ To develop the ability to reason one’s way to an ethically defensible course of action.
- ❑ To become aware of how the media alter and influence perceptions of the world.

Ethical dilemmas are not always about right versus wrong. Many confront us with conflicting rights and some with unavoidable wrongs. As good people and as good professionals, we may not always make the most ideal decisions, but we should make decisions we can rationally defend.

Journalists are called upon to weigh the possible benefits and harms brought about by their actions in covering stories, in revealing facts that might otherwise be kept private, and in respecting conflicting loyalties. Professionals in advertising and public relations also find themselves confronted by situations in which they must choose between actions that seem equally right or equally wrong in a news context.

In this course, we will study actual cases of people faced with serious ethical problems. We will learn how other thinkers, historical and contemporary, have grappled with the issue of ethical action.

ABOUT THE PROFESSOR

Mr. Plaisance has worked as a journalist at various newspapers around the country for nearly 15 years, including outlets in Los Angeles, south Florida and New Jersey. For most of the 1990s, he was a staff writer for the *Daily Press* in Hampton-Newport News, Virginia, where he covered state politics and government issues. He received a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Missouri in 1985 and a master's degree in English literature from the College of William & Mary in 1996. In 2002, he completed his doctoral degree in mass communication, specializing in media ethics, at Syracuse University, where he also taught journalism and media ethics courses. He is a 1981 graduate of Wheat Ridge High School in suburban Denver. He joined the faculty at Colorado State in 2002. His textbook, *Media Ethics: Key Principles for Responsible Practice*, was published in 2008. He conducts research in the areas of journalistic decision-making, media sociology and in projects involving the application of moral psychology to media practice.

PARTICIPATION & ATTITUDE

Regular online contributions to class discussions are critical to the success of this course and will be expected through RamCT threaded Discussion Topics and postings. Given the nature of the course, significant engagement in & regular contribution to discussions is critical to your success in the course. I expect our threads to be robust and provocative. I also hope the subjects of the readings and videos will make the course fun and lively. But groping for ethically appropriate responses to situations often means thinking aloud, struggling with ideas and taking a few mental wrong turns. That's OK! We will be tackling some sensitive and incendiary topics, so it is critical that everyone feel comfortable in expressing themselves and show respect for opposing viewpoints. I suffer from a LOW tolerance for disrespectful comments in our online environment.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- **Discussions.** As noted above, Discussions are a critical element of the course. You will be expected to contribute to specified topic threads at least three times weekly.
- **Textbooks.** The following required text is available through multiple online outlets, including SAGEpub.com and Amazon.com:
 - *Media Ethics: Key Principles for Responsible Practice.* Patrick Lee Plaisance (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications). 2009.
- **Assigned readings.** There also is a collection of required readings (book chapters & excerpts, articles, etc.) available either on the RamCT course site or through the CSU Library's e-reserve system.
- **Writing assignments.** There will be several 600- to 800-word Response Essays based on the readings and videos. All students also will write a 2,100-word Argumentative Essay and a final 4,000-word Term Project. Late Response Essays are not accepted. Late Argument Essays and Term Projects are automatically docked a full letter grade, whether submitted five minutes or five days late.
- **Current Events.** Regardless of your individual background, interests or career goals, all students enrolled in this course should consider themselves students of the media. Since much of our discussion will be guided by current events, no one can afford to be ignorant of the news. If you are not already, get in the habit of regularly reading national mainstream news outlets (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, or *USA Today*). **We cannot have intelligent discussions about media performance and practices, and we are not able to make intelligent judgments about ethical questions raised by them, if we are unfamiliar with the nature of media practices and content.**

GRADING POLICY

Final grades will be determined on the following scale, based on a total-points-possible basis:

Readings & Video Response Essays	120 points (6 @ 20 points)
Argument Essay	300 points
Term Project	400 points
Discussion Contributions	180 points
Total possible	1,000 points

(Note that your actual point totals may be different; points for each category are weighted proportionately.)

PLAGIARISM & ORIGINALITY OF RESEARCH

In most journalism courses, the fabrication of any portion of an assignment will result in an F for that assignment and may result in an F for the course. *Work performed for another course and submitted to satisfy a requirement for this course will not be accepted and will result in an F for that assignment.*

While we increasingly live in an Internet culture that invites us to blur distinctions regarding original and communal works, your performance as a scholar is based on your ability to articulate your own thoughts and construct your own sentences. I am less than interested in your cut-and-paste expertise. When you are presenting evidence for an argument, it is your responsibility to properly attribute the source of that evidence, whether it is quoted word for word or paraphrased. Failure to do so will be treated as plagiarism since it does not give proper credit for another's work.

Research skills are critical not only to success in this course but to helping you address complex issues that will arise either when you are acting as a media professional or a media consumer. Hence, you will be required to demonstrate that you are working to develop those skills and that you have applied them to your assignments. You are expected to develop your skills in using the library and the Internet, including book and journal volumes and databases accessed through the library Web site. Evidence that you are not doing your own research also will be treated as plagiarism.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

■ **Response Essays.** In lieu of tests, you will be asked to write short “responses” to the readings and videos we will discuss in class. These let me know whether you’ve actually thought about the material in class. (See Response Essay Guidelines handout.) 800 words maximum each.

■ **Argument Essay.** This assignment requires you to choose a specific media ethics controversy and articulate a position supporting or opposing what was done. There are several options:

□ Choose one of the ‘Case in Point’ case studies featured in the Plaisance textbook (there are 3 in each chapter – one in journalism, one in PR, one in advertising).

□ Browse the media ethics archive at the Indiana University School of Journalism site: <http://journalism.indiana.edu/resources/ethics/>

□ Look through the “Cases and Commentaries” section of recent issues of the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* (either online through Morgan Library’s “Mass Media Complete” database or on the shelves: PN4756 .J68; current issues are in the 2nd-floor Journal Room; back issues are on the Movable Shelves in the basement).

□ Browse through some of the many ethics case study books in the library – on journalism ethics, PR ethics, advertising ethics.

(See Argument Essay Guidelines handout.) 2,100 words maximum.

■ **Term Project.** Pick a topic in the news and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of that news coverage. Identify patterns that emerge in the way the issue/event is covered, the ethical questions raised by the coverage, differences between print and broadcast coverage, and assess the quality of the coverage. (See Term Project Guidelines handout.) 4,000 words minimum. Due on the last week of class.

■ **Discussion Contributions.** All students are expected to contribute three times to the Discussion Topics offered for each week: Post to the week’s first Discussion Topic by midnight **Wednesday**; post to the week’s second Discussion Topic by midnight **Friday**, and then reply to something a classmate has written on either of the Topics (choose one) by midnight **Sunday**. Each of your posts is worth 10 points. *Late Discussion posts will be penalized with a 5-point deduction.*

E-MAIL USAGE

I will be available through e-mail on a daily basis, but it is important to be mindful of the proper use of that e-mail access. Many students are tempted to use e-mail in an overly casual or inappropriate way. Always remember to present yourself professionally in e-mail messages. Though I respond to all

serious questions and comments, I may not respond to messages that strike me as inappropriate.

CLASS SCHEDULE

(Subject to change)

Week One: Introduction & overview

Syllabus, expectations. Role of the media. Student Bios.

What is ethics? What the media *ought* to do versus what the media *actually* do. The functions of journalism, advertising, public relations. Definitions of ethics. Have read:

- Plaisance: Introduction & Chapter 1 (Ethics Theory)
- Forsyth Ethical Ideology Questionnaire
- Plaisance: 'Ethical Ideologies of Media Ethics Students'

Week Two: Applying philosophical principles

Ethics in our daily lives. Using the MERITS model. Aristotle's sense of moderation & virtue. Have read:

- Aristotle [on e-reserve]
- Johnstone [on e-reserve]
- Plaisance: Chapter 2 (Ethics in Media)

Duty, lies and utility. Response Essay #1 due on Plaisance. Have read:

- Plaisance: Chapter 3 (Transparency)
- 'Wal Mart and Blogging' [on e-reserve]
- 'PR, Social Media and Transparency' [on e-reserve]

Week Three: Concepts of social morality

The "veil of ignorance" and Rawls' idea of distributive social justice. Distributive justice and utilitarianism: Alternative frameworks for determining what to do. Proposal for Argument Essay due. Have read:

- Plaisance: Chapter 4 (Justice)
- Stafford [on e-reserve]
- 'FCC Issues VNR Fines'

Week Four: Journalistic autonomy & conflict of interest: A lesson from *The Los Angeles Times*

Blurring the line between news & advertising. Response Essay #2 due on Shaw. Video clip: Otis Chandler. Have read:

- Shaw [on e-reserve]

Argument Essay due. Blurring the line. Journalistic roles. Have read:

- Plaisance: Chapter 6 (Autonomy)

Week Five: Journalistic autonomy & conflict of interest: 60 minutes & Big Tobacco. [Screenings of film *The Insider* TBA.]

Discussion of *The Insider*. Blurring the lines. *The Insider* question sheet (counts as Response Essay #3) due.

Discussion of *The Insider* (continued). What is “harm” and how should we talk about it when judging media behavior? Have read:

- Plaisance: Chapter 5 (Harm)
- Banaszynski: ‘Conflicting Loyalties and Personal Choices’

Week Six: Tragedy and disaster in the media

Response Essay #4 due on Deppa. Video: Pan Am 103. Coverage of Pan Am 103, lessons learned, & coverage of other disasters. Have read:

- Deppa [on e-reserve]

Week Seven: What is the journalist's role in society?

How the public perceives journalists. How journalists perceive themselves. Government & the press in wartime. Have read:

- Gerth [on e-reserve]
- Shane [on e-reserve]
- Plaisance: 'The Ethos of Getting the Story'

The meaning of 'community' in a 'Me' generation. Have read:

- Plaisance: Chapter 8 (Community)

Week Eight: Perceptions of bias & media structure

Is objectivity dead? Video clip: *Bowling for Columbine*. Have read:

- Goldberg [on e-reserve]

What the research says on perceived bias, the "hostile media phenomenon" and the "third-person effect." Have read:

- Byrd [on e-reserve]

Fall Break. No assignments.

Week Nine: The myth of objectivity & perceptions of bias

Are the news media liberal? Conservative? Neither? Have read:

- Alterman [on e-reserve]

Discussion on perceptions of media bias. Hierarchy of influences on news media content. Proposal for Term Project due.

Week Ten: Marketing sex and coolness

Video: *The Persuaders*. The effects and influences of marketing in media.
Have read:

- Maciejewski [on e-reserve]

Week Eleven: Marketing sex and coolness (continued)

Video: *Killing Us Softly 3*. Effects and influences of advertising. Use of gender stereotypes in the media.

Week Twelve: Privacy

Defining privacy. The right to be left alone versus obligations as community members. Have read:

- Plaisance: Chapter 7 (Privacy)

Response Essay #5 due on Plaisance. Why journalists can't protect privacy. Questions on photojournalism.

Week Thirteen: Persuasion & loyalty in the media

Being socially responsible in the PR world: serving two masters. Have read:

- Henderson [on e-reserve]

The nature of propaganda. Selling Brand America after September 11. Have read:

- Plaisance: 'Selling Brand America' [on e-reserve]

Week Fourteen: Genocide & the ethics of television

Moral disgust: TV's new role in the global media village? How can journalists be "moral witnesses?" Response Essay #6 due on Ignatieff. Have read:

- Ignatieff [on e-reserve]
- Hedges [on e-reserve]
- Bowden [on e-reserve]

Week Fifteen: Moral agency and you

Moral development theory. Ethical growth as lifelong process. Term Project due. Have read:

- Plaisance: Chapter 9 (Conclusion)