

JOUR 575: Mass Media Ethics and Social Issues

TEAM CASE STUDY 1 – NEWS DILEMMA

Submitted by Dr. Kristen Alley Swain, University of Mississippi

Overview: Your team will analyze a case study that you collaboratively choose from among several options in the Patterson/Wilkins book. This is a two-part project: systematic analysis using a decision model, and critical analysis through addressing additional questions in the textbook.

Deadline: The case study project document is due 11:59 pm Thursday, July 30, 2009. Submit your team's case study analysis as a Word or rich-text document via attachment to kaswain@olemiss.edu.

PART 1: POYNTER ETHICS TOOL ANALYSIS – Each member of your team should first skim the case studies in the packet. Discuss favorites and then select one case to analyze. Everyone on your team should take time to carefully read the case study before beginning any discussion.

Envision your team as a team of editors confronted with the dilemma, at the moment you must make a decision. Many cases talk about what was decided and its aftermath. However, your team should “travel back in time,” to the moment before any action was taken. Imagining this will help you work through the Poynter Ethics Tool, which first asks you to state the basic dilemma.

Refer to the attached *Poynter Ethics Tool* to work through the dilemma. Discuss your answers as a group for every question before typing a final response. Type each tool question and your team responses below each question. Some questions may require brief responses, while others will require more in-depth answers.

- Be thorough in addressing every question.
- Provide specific details or supporting examples whenever possible.
- Cite specific ethical principles, philosophies, duties, and values.
- Identify/explain the conflicts among any of these concepts.

Reminders:

- For step 6 in the tool, list all relevant stakeholders (individuals and groups), in addition to answering the Poynter questions for this step. For each stakeholder on your list, write at least one paragraph that states the stakeholder's view of the situation and what he/she would want to happen.
- For step 10, write a 2-3 page (double-spaced) newspaper editorial piece or press conference statement that explains and justifies your team decision. This piece will recap the material your team developed through answering all the Poynter tool questions. Imagine that it will be seen by those named in the story, sources, people hurt by the decision, journalists at a competing shop, and/or a teen who looks up to you. Write it from the perspective of a decision-maker, explaining your team's decision to outraged audiences or affected stakeholders who might disagree with the decision. Identify the other options you considered and explain why you rejected them.

PART 2: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS – Write collaborative responses to all of the questions listed at the end of your chosen case study in the Patterson/Wilkins book (macro, mid-range, and micro issues). Type both the question and your full response. Responses will be evaluated on thoroughness, use of supporting detail, application of relevant concepts and philosophies, and quality of critical thinking.

POYNTER ETHICS TOOL

(with clarifying explanations and questions added for this assignment)

Step 1: Define the goal. What do we need to decide and when do we need to decide it?

Step 2: Start with the facts.

1. What do we know for sure?
2. What has happened so far?
3. What pieces of the puzzle are missing?
4. What are our assumptions?
5. How might we be wrong?
6. What are the facts from the point of view of those who might be harmed by our choice?
7. Do we know enough to make this decision now?
8. What else do we need to know?
9. Do I need clarity on certain facts or additional facts? If so, how can I get that clarity?

Step 3: Know the professional purpose.

1. What information (or story) does our audience need?
2. Why are we obliged to report this particular information?

(If your dilemma involves a story or other content, answer these questions before you go on. If it's not about news gathering and reporting, skip to the next step.)

Step 4: Consider the principles at stake. Identify relevant professional and social principles.

1. *Professional* – List all ethical principles in this situation that pertain to *news professionals* (examples: serve the public interest, hold the powerful accountable, give voice to the voiceless, inform the public, etc.)

Many professional principles are reflected in media codes of ethics, such as the Society of Professional Journalists code: <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>.

Also check out *Bob Steele's Guiding Principles for the Journalist*:

http://www.poynter.org/?post_type=post&p=1751

2. *Social* – List all ethical principles in the situation that pertain to *other stakeholders* (examples: do not jeopardize a life, minimize harm, act justly, help those in immediate need, keep promises, respect people, do not deceive, etc.)

Many social principles are gleaned from the philosophies of Kant (non-consequentialist principles), Mill (utilitarian principles), Ross (duties), Rawls (contract principles) and Aristotle (principles of character). Review your notes about these philosophers.

Examples of principle statements: “*We are committed to _____; We respect _____; We believe _____ is crucial; We have a responsibility to _____; We should not _____; We should avoid _____*”, etc.

Step 5: Identify principles that collide. A true dilemma is a conflict of two or more principles. A principle does not change with circumstances, though another principle might outweigh it. All proposed actions beyond this step will be weighed against the backdrop of principles.

- Identify all principles in this situation that collide with each other.
- Focus your discussion on just one or two pairs of conflicting principles that are most relevant to your problem (i.e., Principle A vs. Principle B).

Step 6: Identify the stakeholders.

1. Identify all potential stakeholders in the case (individuals and groups/organizations), and then write a stakeholder viewpoint statement for each (1-3 paragraphs per stakeholder). You might have each member of your team adopt the role of a different stakeholder, to entertain divergent viewpoints in your decision-making process (for example, “As a reader, I would...)
2. Identify the stakeholders that are the most affected by the situation.
3. Identify the stakeholders that are the most vulnerable.

Step 7: Identify your options.

1. Identify at least three options (alternatives).
2. What alternative courses of action are possible? Choose at least three options.

Step 8: Evaluate your options.

1. Revisit the principles you said were the most relevant in this case. Discuss the impact of each option on the most relevant principles at stake.
2. Which option would likely be the favorite of the most affected stakeholder(s)? The stakeholders don't decide what you're going to do, but imagining their preferences is useful when deciding, and helps you minimize harm.
3. Which would the most vulnerable stakeholder(s) probably like best?

Step 9: Make a choice.

1. If you assigned equal rank to two or more principles, now is the time to decide which you value most in this situation.
 - Which option best serves the most important principles in this case? All things considered, what looks like the best way to proceed?
 - Does the principle you selected reflect reasons and actions that are binding on all people, at all times, and in all places, given the same relevant circumstances? If not, explain.

2. What can be done to reduce the cost to any principles that are being outweighed in this case? (For example, if you decided to respect privacy at the cost of informing the public, how could you more fully inform the public while putting privacy first?)
3. How can we minimize the harm to vulnerable stakeholders? At least one vulnerable stakeholders may be harmed by your choice, so minimizing harm is important. (For example, if you decided that informing the public is more important than protecting privacy, how can you reduce the impact on those whose privacy is compromised?)

Step 10: Test your thinking.

1. Write a brief statement that fills in the blanks:

We have decided to _____ . We reached the decision after weighing _____ . We also considered _____ . We think this decision best upholds the principle of _____ . We believe our obligation to _____ is outweighed in this case because _____ . To reduce the damage to _____ we will _____ .

2. Finally, write a 2- to 3-page, double-spaced statement explaining and justifying your reasoning to a public audience. Draw upon the team discussions of the Poynter Tool steps to create this document. You might write this piece in the form of a newspaper editorial or a statement that a PR representative might deliver at a press conference. Imagine that your piece will be seen by everyone named in the story, as well as the interview sources, people potentially hurt by the decision, journalists at a competing shop, and/or a teenager who looks up to you. This essay will be a major part of your case study grade. Write it from the perspective of a decision-maker, explaining your team's decision to outraged audiences or affected stakeholders who might disagree with the decision.