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Teaching Media Ethics at the Graduate Level

Kati Tusinski Berg

Marquette University, kati.berg@marquette.edu

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Review: The Handbook of Mass Media Ethics

Chris Roberts
Professional Freedom and Responsibility
Chair

The book that continually helped me during my recently completed doctoral pursuit was *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research*, edited by Don W. Stacks and Michael B. Salwen, his late colleague at the University of Miami. Their 1996 book offers thoughtful introductions to dozens of topics that were written by some of the top names in our business. It's still used in classrooms worldwide, and its second edition is coming before the end of 2008.

That book now has its first-cousin on my office shelf: *The Handbook of Mass Media Ethics*, edited by Lee Wilkins and Clifford G. Christians. Both offer deep and wide surveys into important topics for mass communication scholars. Both offer history and hints about the future of their fields. And both will remain useful for years to come.

The just-published *Handbook of Mass Media Ethics* has well-known editors and contributors. The University of Missouri's Wilkins edits *The Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, and the University of Illinois' Christians remains a missionary in the study of media ethics. Inside they have 28 chapters written by some of the key names in media ethical scholarship, from old hands including Lou Hodges and Jay Black to scholars that Black described during his retirement dinner during the AEJMC conference in Chicago as

"the new generation" of thinkers who are further advancing our scholarly calling.

The goal of the book, as Wilkins said in a phone call, was "to pull all of our scholarship together and to try to tie all the strings together in one book." The result is nearly 400 pages divided into categories of:

- Foundations, which provides heavy thought into the philosophical basis for media ethics as well as the history of media ethics education and theory.
- Professional practices, which includes looks at journalism and photojournalism, at advocacy and propaganda, at the blurring of lines between news and advocacy, as well as at entertainment and at the blurring of lines between news and entertainment.
- Concrete issues, with chapters that include the topics of journalistic transparency and peace journalism. Little has been published on those topics, and Wilkins noted that she and Christians "wanted to make sure we were looking at topics that are on the horizon." Other topics have received more attention – privacy, conflict of interest, and digital ethics – and will receive still more as technology continues to raise new questions.
- Institutional considerations, including chapters discussing corporate ownership and pure evil, and the ethics of Buddhists, feminists, and communitarians.

Part of the fun of the book – and the fun of living in the body of knowledge that is media ethics – is

sorting through differences in mass media, in ethical approaches, and being made aware of the world's disparate societies. The authors wisely start the book with University of Michigan-Dearborn's Wayne Woodward's wide-angle look at the fundamentals on the nature of human communication, and they end with Georgia State's Mark D. Alleyne's look at the difficulties of creating a global standard for media ethics. In between you'll need a nimble mind to work through the complexity (and sometimes, the sheer contradiction) of arguments, etiologies, and ethical approaches.

The chapters are generally well written and edited, but this is not a book you'd adopt for anything less than a high-level graduate course. "We weren't aiming this at students at all," Wilkins said. "We were aiming at scholars and some graduate students, but not as a textbook. We wanted to find ways to assist scholars as they were thinking about topics, to give them a place to start."

That they have done. Congratulations on a long-needed and useful collection of histories, guideposts, and trailheads.

Chris Roberts, Ph.D., recently joined the journalism department at the University of Alabama's College of Communication and Information Sciences.

Wilkins, L., & Christians, C.G. (Eds.). (2009) *The Handbook of Mass Media Ethics*. New York: Routledge. (Hardback \$150; Paperback \$60.)

Teaching media ethics at the graduate level

Kati Berg
Teaching Chair

I am pleased to serve as the Teaching Chair for the next year and look forward to sharing my thoughts and ideas on teaching media ethics. My goal is to carry on the strong tradition of my predecessors while introducing relevant and timely topics

related to teaching media ethics. In this first piece, I address the challenges of teaching a graduate ethics course.

Last spring, I had the opportunity to teach a graduate level ethics course: Research and Professional Communication Ethics. Because of departmental demands, I had not yet taught an ethics class at the Department of Advertising and Public

Relations at Marquette University. Yes, my first time teaching ethics was to be done at the graduate level...

My sense of being overwhelmed subsided when I learned I would be co-teaching combined sections with Dr. John Pauly, our Dean at the time. Not only would I have a co-instructor, but my teaching
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partner would also be someone I admire and respect as a teacher and a scholar. Needless to say, I was thrilled. It is a rare opportunity for a junior faculty member to prepare and teach a graduate seminar with a well-respected, experienced professor.

I soon found out that it was too good to be true; there were not enough students to fill two sections. I was on my own. Even though I had taught a graduate course in advertising and public relations management twice, I was a bit leery. Not only was this my first time teaching ethics, but this course is a requirement for all master's students, not just those interested in advertising and public relations. I was definitely feeling a little outside of my comfort zone. But I forged ahead and in the end it turned out to be a good learning experience for both me and my students.

In preparation for the seminar, I reviewed the syllabi of past instructors and called upon my experiences as a teaching assistant for Dr. Tom Bivins at the University of Oregon. I wanted to provide a strong theoretical foundation while also implementing case studies to make the course challenging and thought provoking. I also needed to be mindful of the broad interests of my students. Taking all of these issues into consideration when deciding on

a text, I decided to use Johannesen, Valde, and Whedbee's *Ethics in Human Communication*, Patterson and Wilkins' *Media Ethics: Issues and Cases* as well as multiple journal articles. The theoretical material covered was used to evaluate the ethicality of practical "real-world" persuasive influence attempts in interpersonal, organizational, corporate and public settings.

The class was highly dependent on active student participation; my role was to set the context, facilitate productive discussions, raise some questions and keep us on track. We began each class with a brief discussion about a specific ethical issue in the news. Since the news article was applicable to that particular week's readings, it was a great segue to the ethical theories and/or perspectives. As each student was required to submit a one-page response paper on the readings, I could gauge their comprehension and understanding of the material. During the second half of each class, student teams facilitated a discussion that integrated the theoretical and practical implications of one of the media ethics chapters.

The assignments allowed students to explore their interests in greater depth. For example, I asked students to write a book

review on a communication ethics book of their choice. One student chose Sissela Bok's *Lying*, another reviewed *Dirty Politics* by Kathleen Hall Jamieson while one brave soul took on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The students were also given the opportunity to examine an ethical issue of their choice for the final research paper. Topics for the term paper ranged from photojournalism to cause marketing.

Coming in to this seminar, managing the expectations of both full-time and part-time graduate students was my number one concern. This is why I implemented a mix of theory and practice. This way, full-time graduate students benefited from the professional perspective because it provided a different mindset for critiquing ethical case studies. The students' class evaluations indicated that this approach was successful. The mix of students no doubt made class material selection and discussion topics difficult, but in the end I was able to use the class diversity to my advantage, which resulted in rich class discussions reflecting many areas of interest and expertise. ☞

Considering the importance of objectivity

Shannon A. Bowen
Research Chair

Is objectivity necessary for ethical journalism? Is mass communication predicated on the idea that analyses supported by journalists are free of bias, personal interest, or subjective opinion? Or is such an opinion an inextricable part of analysis, therefore expected by readers? I ask you to ponder these questions not only as a media ethics scholar, but also as you begin to form ideas for your research paper submission for next summer's AEJMC convention in Boston. As critics on the ethics of media, we are forced to ask: What is the role of objectivity in creating ethical mass communication?

Moral philosophy can be of assistance in answering this question. A deontological (Kant 1785/1993) approach to ethical decision making requires an objective and unbiased assessment of information in order

to make an ethical decision. Self-interest, as well as any other subjective interest, is considered by



Kant to be a bias that makes an ethical decision impossible. Kant tells us that without objectivity, ethical outcomes are impossible. If the moral autonomy necessary to make an ethical decision is not present, Kant advised that we do not then have the freedom required to make a morally worthy decision based on rationally weighing all pertinent and available perspectives.

The watch dog function of the news media relies on objectivity and an unbiased and independent reporting of facts. These concepts separate journalism from propaganda, editorial opinion and commentary, or advocacy-oriented public relations. But who decides what constitutes a relevant fact and what that fact means? We have to rely on the objective detachment of the media member to make that judgment. That judgment, however, appears to be lacking or failing in many cases.

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