

Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)

Volume 10
Issue 1 *Syracuse Scholar* 1990

Article 9

1990

A question of journalism ethics

Lucinda D. Davenport

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar>



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Journalism Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davenport, Lucinda D. (1990) "A question of journalism ethics," *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)*: Vol. 10 :
Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar/vol10/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)* by an authorized editor of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

A QUESTION OF JOURNALISM ETHICS

LUCINDA D. DAVENPORT

THE PRESENT PAPER is based above all on the principle that no educational goal can be more important than that of providing every new generation with a strong sense of ethics. I point out the importance, along with some of the problems, limitations, and difficulties, of achieving that goal in the educational preparation of journalists. A second principle underlying my discussion is that there exists a complex and critical relationship between mass communication and human beings in modern society. That relationship is influenced by the psychological makeup of individuals as well as by their position in the social structure, their demographic characteristics, and the social ties that they have to other people. In many cases that relationship can involve consequences as important to people as those situations and consequences found in law, medicine, or other critical areas of professional activity. This means that ethical considerations in journalism touch us all.



Surely it follows, then, that students learning to package the news for transmission by our media and to control forms of content for such transmission must receive exposure not only to the concepts and principles that will be relevant to their technical activities in the labor force but to the predominant ethical ideals of our civilization. I argue that since there are no apparent alternatives by which that kind of exposure can be accomplished, the ethical preparation of future reporters, editors, and media managers must be based on college and university curricula in the liberal arts.

This is scarcely a new idea. Schools, departments, and programs of journalism and mass communication have long been developed within such a context. While the academic community has for decades been strongly committed to grounding the education of journalists in the liberal arts, there are some people who currently manage the media who have different views. Traditionally, editors and managers have tended to maintain that higher education is largely irrelevant for the practical journalist. Even today, some continue to denounce it as a handicap that a beginning reporter will have to overcome.

But where should the preparation of the journalist take place? Should it be at the vocational school level? Or do programs of higher education stressing the liberal arts actually have advantages? Even though the answer may seem obvious to most academicians, it remains a troublesome issue

for the media industries, the students who must decide how best to pursue careers in journalism, the educators in communication, and the public at large.

I attempt to show that it is the *question of ethics* that will ultimately provide guidelines as to how and where journalists should be educated. It will be evident from the discussion that the need for ethical training, the degree to which journalists now exercise adequate ethical judgment, and, above all, the adequacy of their present exposure to ethical preparation remain as troublesome issues in the ongoing controversies about the nature of journalism as a vocation (merely exercising skills) versus a profession (using a complex body of knowledge within a strong ethical code).

JOURNALISM AS VOCATION VS. PROFESSION

The exercise of ethical judgment in the application of a body of knowledge to the service of humanity is so central to the concept of profession that it almost defines it. If that can be accepted, there are serious doubts that journalism as currently organized and practiced is actually a profession. In modern times, perhaps no area of activity has come under greater scrutiny or has created greater controversy concerning its ethical practices than journalism. A solid case can be made that if journalism is to be regarded as a true profession it will require a stronger foundation in ethics than it now enjoys. Its foundation will have to be at least equal to that demanded of any of the traditional, learned professions. With unfortunate and noteworthy exceptions, those professions apply their accumulated wisdom within strong ethical standards to benefit humanity through law, the healing arts, science, or spiritual guidance. In so doing, they serve as enviable models of what a true profession of journalism should be like.

Why is a strong ethical awareness so important in the journalism field? Journalists must be able to justify actions to themselves, realize the outcome of those actions even before they take place, and successfully articulate their judgments publicly. Thus, ethics is involved in both the issue of journalists needing a liberal arts education and the debate on journalism as a profession.

Some critics say that journalism education belongs not in colleges and universities but in vocational or technical schools. They feel that a liberal arts education is not necessary to round out one's education; skills training is sufficient. Thus, the journalist-as-technician would be restricted to learning only the formulas of sentence formation and story organization. Frankly, that idea scares me. We live in a complex world where every event or issue has many sides and implications. Much of what people know of business, government, and society as a whole comes from stories prepared by journalists—from images of reality constructed by journalists. Since those images have significant influence on our behavior and beliefs, their construction is a task that should not be conducted by technicians—even those who are well-trained but who are still *solely* technicians.

Journalists with liberal arts degrees usually have been taught something about science, history, politics and government, religion, and society—the world. Requirements vary among schools, but journalism students also have some studies in the legal, ethical, and historical components of

journalism. These journalists do not blithely write just about what was done or said but also *think* about the “how” and “why” of events or issues and relate those to society. They know how to relate actions to ideas and how to question other people’s assumptions; I do not mean that they use their own opinion to influence others. They are sensitive to issues because they possess knowledge about thinking as well as knowledge about various subjects.

Technically trained journalists might want to prepare their reports in an analytical manner, but they have been taught neither when or how to do so, nor why it is important. These reporters might eventually obtain sensitivities while on the job, but I shudder to think of the far-reaching, often indirect effects of the many first-time situations when experience teaches journalists what not to do again.

Techni-journalists remind me of those in the McCarthy years (1950–54)—reporters who merely related what Wisconsin’s Senator Joseph R. McCarthy said, because he was a news maker, and did not question whether what he said was true. That a source may lack credibility or that an event has important implications should be noted in a news account, but unfortunately the story often is written in black and white without the suggestion of grey. Grey areas occur not only in reporting and writing news events but also in managing news organizations—positions to which many journalists are promoted. Certainly a technical school education is not enough to equip one for effective and concerned media handling.

Why anyone would want to negate the advantages of a liberal arts degree is beyond me. A competent journalist not only must learn how to format various types of news stories, but also must ascertain the meaning, the impact of those stories—the implications of the content. A liberal arts background helps one to make accountable and responsible judgments and decisions, and teaches one to articulate successfully the reasoning behind those decisions. Once equipped with liberal arts degrees, practicing journalists become teachers of the news audience through the publication or broadcast of their stories. The fundamental qualities of teachers, and thus of journalists with liberal arts backgrounds, are the capacity for critical inquiry, a direct grasp of the subject, a desire to share it, communicative abilities, and a sensitivity to the audience.¹

William May, the Cary M. Maguire University Professor of Ethics at Southern Methodist University, wrote that none of the traditional professions—lawyers, doctors, and Protestant clergy—displayed quite the “anti-academic bias that one found among successful journalists.” May added that Horace Greeley in 1860 dismissed a university education with the comment that he could “not hire a college graduate who did not show that he [or she] could overcome the handicap of a college education.”²

MUCH OF THE SAME blasting comes from today’s editors. The typical newspaper manager in 1979 was a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant. Furthermore, the typical editor is a married man, in his late forties, with a child.³ All of these personal and social attributes imply a characteristic set of values. Mass communication research

1. William F. May, “Professional Ethics, the University, and the Journalist,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 1, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 1986): 20–31.

2. *Ibid.*, 20.

3. C. L. Ogan, C. J. Brown, and D. H. Weaver, “Characteristics of Managers of Selected U.S. Daily Newspapers,” *Journalism Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (1979): 803–9.

4. Hugh M. Culbertson, "Reporters and Editors—Some Differences in Perspective," *Newspaper Research Journal* 2, no. 2 (1981): 17–27.

5. Sam L. Becker, *Discovering Mass Communication* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1983).

6. Roy Fisher, "Prominent Educators Assess Journalism Education's Future" (ed. Paul R. Parsons), *Journalism Educator* 41, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 5–6.

7. Telephone interview with John Mollwitz of the *Milwaukee Journal*, 2 December 1988.

8. Lucinda D. Davenport, "News Story Quotes: Verbatim?" (Paper presented to the Mass Communication and Society Division, Association of Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication, National Convention, Norman, Okla., 1986).

9. Edwin O. Haroldsen and Kenneth Harvey, "Frowns Greet New J-Grads in Magazine Job Market," *Journalism Educator* 34, no. 2 (July 1979): 3–8, 26; Gordon Mills et al., "Newspaper Editors Point to J-Grad Deficiencies," *Journalism Educator* 35, no. 2 (July 1980): 12–19.

10. L. Kessler, "Could You Pass a Grammar Test?" *Bulletin* (November–December 1984): 7.

shows that senior editors, copy editors, and wire editors tend more than people in other fields to have traditional views about their business.⁴ Everything that such gatekeepers *are* (in terms of their values) affects what they decide is news, how they see an event or situation or program, what they ask about, and how they organize what they perceive.⁵

Attitudes are changing, however, and perhaps the old sentiments of journalism managers against liberal arts degrees and ethics courses will no longer be applicable. There is evidence of change: for example, a student in a news writing course in the 1940s at Kansas State University learned that a news story had four Ws—who, what, when, and where. Since then, a W for *why* and an H for *how* have been added.⁶

Another relevant issue is the traditional idea of "objectivity." Not too terribly long ago, reporters strived for something called "objective reporting"—"just the facts." Today, we realize that no matter how hard we try, there really is no such thing as complete objectivity. Because of our individual upbringing, socialization, and experience, we view everything with subjective eyes. College courses in anthropology, psychology, and sociology have made us aware of the subtle and even subconscious biases that come to each of us because of our upbringing (in a particular culture, socioeconomic stratum, region, and even family). Such learning reminds us to check our biases when reporting on and writing about news events.

Some of the complaints that college education is a waste of time center on the nature of the faculty at institutions of higher learning—complaints usually offered with the hoary adage that Ph.D.'s are those who cannot practice, so they teach. Actually, most journalism departments endeavor to have an integration of former media professionals and Ph.D.-level researchers. Journalism professionals are needed to teach skills courses that must be part of the preparation of students who are to work in media industries. By the same token, training as a researcher is needed because data analysis skills have become part of the requirements for putting out a daily news product, and they are distinct from those learned in other curricula.⁷ In addition, researchers often find and try to solve problems in the mass communication area that others may not even see. For instance, it was by doing research for an ethics course that a researcher found that most news writing textbooks (used also in vocational schools) do not adequately instruct students on proper quotation content (not to be confused with mechanics). Thus, new reporters, graduated with insufficient knowledge in this area, are left to learn about quoting on their own. Leaving this to on-the-job training is unfortunate because the use of quotations is an important part of misrepresentation, news judgment, social responsibility, accuracy, fairness, and the public's right to know.⁸ Another criticism editors often level at universities is that journalism students are not trained in the basics of grammar, writing, and language skills.⁹ There is some substance to this charge: Lauren Kessler found that editors themselves (who are usually college graduates) often flunk grammar quizzes!¹⁰

Some editors might want students trained only in journalism technical schools, but what do trainees want? What students interested in learning journalism would want to lag behind peers receiving college educations? What motivated beginning reporters would want to trail behind those who are learning about the world—the subject on which journalists report and

write? Also, what kind of employers would want employees who are not knowledgeable and articulate about events they are covering? It is true, for the most part, that people hire in their own image. But, perhaps the old arguments of technical school-trained versus university-educated journalists with a background in ethics will disappear with the traditional, non-degreed, cigar-smoking, learn-as-you-go editor image as more college-educated journalists are hired and promoted in the field.

To some people, the use of the words “profession” and “professional” is confusing. “Professional” is used generally in two ways: informally to mean the opposite of “amateur” (professional football), and formally to indicate a class of occupations with certain characteristics.¹¹ It is the formal usage that is deliberated here.

To provide a perspective on this issue, we can look to the experience of other fields. Abraham Flexner, in a 1910 *Carnegie Report on Medical Education*, suggested the reform of the education of physicians and showed why a move to universities would be an improvement. He paved the way not only for three traditional professions—lawyers, doctors, and Protestant ministers—but for others aspiring education and legitimacy in the eyes of society.¹² Flexner identified six characteristics of these traditional professions that he felt set them apart from trades, crafts, and at the time, business. May competently combined these six groups into three:¹³

1. Intellect—having access to a complex body of knowledge not available to everyone, and the ability to translate ideas (theory) into practice. This component distinguishes professional education from mere training because trained people can perform routines but do not know *why* they perform them;
2. Morals—using their knowledge to serve human needs and not simply to achieve their own ends;
3. Organization—having a collective body to maintain and improve standards.

Thus, the ideal was to improve intellectual standards by associating professional education with the university, and moral standards by eliminating impostors and preventing fraud.

Given Flexner’s criteria, we can identify what kind of practitioners fit the standards. They are journalists who have university degrees with a strong component of liberal arts courses, who tend to think and behave in accordance with ethical standards as they go about their work, and who are involved in one of the many professional journalism organizations, such as the Society of Professional Journalists. Journalists who do not meet such criteria cannot be classified as professionals.

A modified definition of professional came in 1953 when Dean Roscoe Pound indicated that a profession is a group of people pursuing a learned art.¹⁴ This requires specialized learning (in a university) in a practical area (reporting, perhaps) based in the spirit of public service (with attention paid to ethical behavior).

Both Flexner’s and Pound’s definitions of profession include a liberal arts degree from a university that teaches technical intelligence (how do I get from here to there?) and critical intelligence (first asking: is “there” worth getting to?).¹⁵ Critical knowledge raises questions of ends, purposes,

11. Louis W. Hodges, “The Journalist and Professionalism,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 1, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 1986): 32–36.

12. A. Flexner, “Is Social Work a Profession?” *School and Society* 1 (1915): 901–11.

13. May, “Professional Ethics,” 21–22.

14. Hodges, “The Journalist and Professionalism,” 32–33.

15. Technical and critical intelligence is explained by May, “Professional Ethics,” 23.

16. Ibid.

and values because these matters are not merely questions of subjective preference or raw feeling.¹⁶ Educators at universities do not just teach technique; they also train the mind to concentrate on the ends to which the technique serves. These are things that any professional must consider. Also intertwined in both characterizations is the discussion of morals and the public good—knowledge learned in good ethics courses.

ETHICS IN THE CONTEXT OF JOURNALISM

Defined as the study of standards of conduct and moral judgment, ethics also is the system of morals of a particular person or group. Thus, media ethics is the study of those things that journalists should think about before acting, that is, the reasoned standards of the journalism field.

In the aftermath of a professional ethics conference at Harvard University, communication researcher James Carey wrote:

*The thing that struck me after a gruelling two and a half days was that problems are the same in all professional programs. I had come to think that journalism was not part of the traditional professions, that law and medicine were not having quite the same anxiety [about ethics] that some of us were having. I felt that way until someone from medical school commented that they get plenty of students in their ethics courses because it is the only course in the curriculum with any intellectual content. Everything else was technique. After years of holding and developing techniques, the skills of medicine would have fallen through. So it is not only our problem in that sense for journalism.*¹⁷

17. Cited in Thomas W. Cooper, "Communication and Ethics: The Informal and Formal Curricula," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 2, no. 1 (Fall–Winter 1986–87): 76.

18. T. Joseph Scanlon, "Some Reflections on the Matter of Ethics in Journalism," in *Truth and Credibility*, ed. H. S. Broudy (New York: Longman, 1981), 127–37.

19. M. Allison, "A Literature Review of Approaches to the Professionalism of Journalists," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 1, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 1986): 5–19.

20. Douglas Birkhead, "News Media Ethics and the Management of Professionals," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 1, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 1986): 43.

21. David Brock, review of *Beyond Malice: The Media's Years of Reckoning*, by Richard M. Clurman, *Commentary* 86 (September 1988): 70.

22. Gale E. Klappa, "Journalism and the Anti-Media Backlash," *Vital Speeches of the Day* 51 (April 1985): 376–79.

Journalists in their daily work are facing decisions about what they should or should not report, and most of these decisions can legitimately be described as decisions about appropriate behavior—in short, ethical decisions.¹⁸ People who work in the areas of print, broadcasting, public relations, and new communication technologies need to think about appropriate behavior and about the perception society has of them and of what they *seem* to be doing. Ethics researcher Marianne Allison stressed that public perceptions of the role of an occupation are as important to its professional success as actually occupying that role.¹⁹ If the public thinks the journalist is biased, then the story will be neither credible to them nor regarded as an honest effort to get at all sides of the issue.

Unfortunately, ethical deliberations of journalists still are largely "technical and procedural"²⁰—they tend to be concerned more with the production standards of their industry than with moral codes for behavior. They do often ponder the moral implications of their reports but do not evaluate what they observe and do as being ethical behavior. In addition, the press ignores the real problems or overall impressions resulting from their "damning stories" so long as they stay within the law.²¹

In 1983, a National Opinion Research Center poll found that fewer than 14 percent of Americans had a great deal of confidence in news media.²² Evidence of public distrust is also seen in the courtroom because individuals are showing an increasing tendency to fight the media and their news stories. Rulings against the media are the common result, especially when

the battles are decided by juries: between 1976 and 1985 almost 85 percent of the 106 major libel verdicts by juries were against the media.²³ More news organizations now hire lawyers full-time, and more books are published about the media's legal rights. If journalists and their managers were making responsible decisions and were truly sensitive to possible harmful aspects of the ways in which they report events, this abundance of legal activity might not be happening. There are many occasions when journalists have been insensitive to their audiences and to their subjects.

Perhaps it is because of this lack of sensitivity that government officials as well as private individuals sometimes want to exclude the news media. For example, when the United States invaded Grenada, no one invited the press; this might have been an appropriate decision. Opinion polls taken weeks after the invasion showed that public trust and good will toward the news media was low and that the public felt the best policy was to not encourage the media's presence. Some people said they felt the news organizations would somehow use the military's information and actions to further their own business ends.²⁴

In 1985, General Westmoreland sued CBS for \$120 million for misleading the public and putting forth the network's own thesis about the size of enemy forces in South Vietnam. Jurors, watching two hours of the show's unaired interview outtakes, observed that the news organization had manipulated the production to reflect its own opinions. During this trial, a senior news executive from another network was heard saying: "I hope CBS loses. We do terrible things on the news."²⁵ That same year *Time* was sued by Israel's Ariel Sharon for libel and the use of unidentified sources. Although the jury found the magazine innocent of libel, it agreed that the information about Sharon was false and defamatory, and that the employees acted negligently and carelessly.

Examples of media misconduct continue year after year. Why? If people working in the mass media have not been instructed specifically in mass communication ethics, often they do not know the outcomes of previous situations similar to their own or understand possible repercussions of their judgment. One of the most important benefits of media ethics courses is the provision of background information that journalists can assimilate in order to understand, justify, and articulate their decisions. Undoubtedly, it is important to be able to reason why something is good or right, bad or unjust. For example, someone without a media ethics background might not have fully understood what Janet Cooke did wrong. (She is the reporter who won a Pulitzer Prize for writing a report on a pathetic child in a slum and drug environment. The child did not exist; Cooke invented the whole report and justified her actions with the claim that he was a "composite.") After all, it *could* have been a true story, and her purpose was to direct attention to a major societal problem. That could not be thought of as all bad—or could it?

Articulating an ethical justification for disclosing sensitive information is not always easy. Is it all right to pry into a person's life if it will produce information affecting society's welfare? Why should or shouldn't a reporter run for a political office if she or he has a great interest in the well-being of the community, whereas other folks might not. Wouldn't it be good for the community if this person had a government beat and was already

23. *Ibid.*, 377.

24. This example and those following are from Klappa, "Journalism and Anti-Media Backlash," and Brock, Review of *Beyond Malice*.

25. Brock, Review of *Beyond Malice*, 70.

knowledgeable of the politics of the city, instead of being a general assignment reporter? Or would this be unethical? The decision might depend on the size of the community. What if this is a small town or a metropolitan area? Does it matter? Furthermore, should the behavioral guidelines applied to reporters also apply to newspaper managers? Yes, managers represent the newspapers, but often they do not do the actual reporting and writing of stories.

How much, if at all, should a journalist's personal life be restricted? A reporter who is interested in a subject probably shares that interest most with those who are actively involved in it. Sports writers, athletes, and sports managers get along well; drama critics share interests with playwrights, producers, and performers; and political reporters share interests with public officials.²⁶ If it is all right for reporters to write favorably about their athlete friends or favorite actors, is it equally all right to write nice stories about politician friends? Is it right to quote repeatedly one city official who says bright and interesting things for readers, but not quote other officials who could also use exposure for their political careers? How would one judge limits to the principle of confidentiality? And, how hard should one go after the truth when it is bound to wreck lives?²⁷ Many managers, editors, and reporters say they decide what to do on a case-by-case basis.²⁸ Wouldn't it make better ethical sense to apply the same decision criteria to all such situations?

26. Scanlon, "Reflections," 134.

27. This question appears in May, "Professional Ethics," 25.

28. Lucinda D. Davenport and Ralph S. Izard, "News Media Restrictive Policies," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 1, no. 1 (Fall-Winter 1985-86): 4-9.

FORTUNATELY, increasing attention is being paid to these ethical dilemmas. Journalism organizations now have committees, workshops, and conferences devoted to media ethics. The Society of Professional Journalists and the American Newspaper Publishers Association have ethics policies that are used as guides for many print broadcast news organizations. In addition, more newspapers hire intermediators to deal with readers' opinions about news stories. Moreover, the Gannett and Poynter Foundations provide funding for teaching and research in ethics. More journalism articles and textbooks are directed toward ethics study; and there is also a journal devoted to issues in mass media ethics (*Journal of Mass Media Ethics*).

The number of media ethics courses offered in colleges and universities has increased. Between 1977 and 1984, about 59 new ethics courses were introduced in journalism and mass communication programs, compared with 10 between 1969 and 1977. Media ethics courses totaled 117, with an additional 17 programs offering a new ethics course within two years and 2 more studying its feasibility.²⁹ Yet, on a less encouraging note, only 5 percent of journalism students studied ethics formally in 1984.³⁰ And fewer than one-half of the mass communication and journalism programs offered media ethics courses in 1986.³¹

An ethics course is "an absolute must" for journalism students, said Lan Sluder, a former newspaper editor and publisher:

The primary reason is that reporters are faced almost daily with situations where they must make a decision that hinges on the rights and obligations of the reporter and his or her employer. I used to

29. Clifford G. Christians, "Media Ethics Courses Have Increased since 1977," *Journalism Educator* 40, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 17-19, 51.

30. Ibid.

31. Peterson in Cooper, "Communication and Ethics," 74-75.

*spend literally hours talking with my people about issues such as privacy and the use of documents obtained outside "normal" channels—basic ethics issues.*³²

Courses in mass media ethics can be structured in different ways. A general course would concentrate on philosophy, theology, morals, and principles. As John Dewey and James Tufts wrote in their 1908 *Ethics*:

*Conduct is so intimate that it is not easy to analyze. . . . The perspective for regarding it has been unconsciously fixed by early training. . . . The aim [of the historical introduction of moral principles and theories] accordingly has not been to instill the notions of a school nor to inculcate a ready-made system, but to show the development of theories out of the problems and experiences of every-day conduct, and to suggest how these theories may be fruitfully applied in practical exigencies. . . . The student is put in a position to judge the problems of conduct for himself [or herself]. This emancipation and enlightenment of individual judgment is the chief aim of the theoretical portion.*³³

A specific course geared toward mass communication ethics would center on the influences of the mass media and on the extraordinary power of journalists, who indirectly advise society on how to interpret the day's events. It should invite students to consider their own responsibilities as individuals, members of society, and professional communicators.

Broadcaster Jay Trachman and media ethics researcher Thomas Cooper noted that a common fear of ethical training comes from the suspicion that a strict moral system will be imposed under the guise of "ethics."³⁴ According to Cooper, the value of ethics, however, is not to impose narrow values but rather to expose broader and deeper possibilities than those already subconsciously absorbed from society.³⁵ One such important possibility is *thinking*, especially in a world of disjointed electronic sounds and images. Another possibility is *knowing*. Knowing cannot be discovered through programming or technical training—it occurs from within. A set of values cannot be poured into someone, but can be uncorked from inside the individual. Thinking and knowing help produce the possibility of *expressing*. When truth (knowing) is expressed, a finer quality of communication is likely. Finally, *acting* is a possibility. When acting is based on thinking, and expression is based on knowing, responsible communication occurs. Cooper's logic may well be the base for a specific ethic of communication for communicators. And a course designed with this ethic in mind would encourage rather than discourage discussion in other courses.

Practical ethics consists of rules of behavior normally derived from a set of moral principles. And because people today are better educated, they are more aware of the significance of their behavior and actions in society.³⁶ Discretionary decisions often are made by journalists every day, and it does not matter where or when or at what level they work. Most of these decisions are made without any real reference points—except some ill-defined ones—or any public review or debate.³⁷ Thus, it is important that, as events transpire and controversial questions arise, reporters and their editors—reflecting the vast diversity of American journalism—make

32. Electronic message from L. Sluder to the author on CompuServe Information Services, in PRSIG (Public Relations Forum), Message Section 1 "On Your Own," Message #36257 "Ethics Course Justified," 5 December 1988.

33. J. Dewey and J. H. Tufts, *Ethics* (New York: Henry Holt, 1908), iii–iv.

34. Electronic message from J. Trachman to the author on CompuServe Information Services, in BPFORUM (Broadcasting Professionals Forum), Message Section 1 "General Forum Info.," Message #79819 "Ethics Course Justified," 5 December 1988; Cooper, "Communication and Ethics," 77.

35. Cooper, "Communication and Ethics," 77.

36. Claude-Jean Bertrand, "Media Ethics in Perspective," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 2, no. 1 (Fall–Winter 1986–87): 17–22.

37. Scanlon, "Reflections," 128.

38. Tom Wicker, "First Word," *Omni* 10 (June 1988): 8.

39. Klappa, "Journalism and Anti-Media Backlash," 377.

independent, reasonable decisions about what is necessary to cover and disclose and what is not.³⁸

Finally, if sufficient attention can be given to ethical training for journalists, it seems likely that the public's respect for the media and their credibility can be restored and maintained. A seventeen-year news reporter-turned-public relations official, Gale Klappa, told West Georgia College students that turning public outrage and anger into respect and admiration toward media depends on our own efforts as journalists.³⁹ She was completely right. Let us hope that her generation will be more perceptive than those of the past.

Some steps to turn journalism in the right direction include

1. starting one's professional life with an education that really prepares one for the realities of journalism work;
2. putting accuracy and judgment before getting the story first and realizing the damage that can be done when too much attention is paid to deadlines or scoops; and
3. being open and candid about mistakes by putting corrections in the same dramatic headlines or lead-ins as the original story.

Real-life decision making is complex, but students in media ethics courses can obtain an introduction to their life in the communications world. If they fail to do this, or if journalism educators fail to make it possible for them to do so by not providing appropriate ethics courses, we can all look forward to more of the same. It is not a pleasant thought. ❖

Lucinda D. Davenport is Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism at Michigan State University. Her professional and teaching experience includes print and broadcast reporting, public relations, database systems management, and historical and ethics research. She developed a graduate course focusing on ethics and mass media and has written and presented several papers on journalists and ethics. Her doctorate from Ohio University is in new technologies and mass communication; her master's (University of Iowa) and bachelor's (Baylor University) are in journalism.