

# Ethics Defines the Professional

A thorough understanding of ethics is what will separate professional journalists from someone with a lambasting opinion and an internet portal. As more technology becomes available to a wider audience, journalists will capture their market and define their distinctiveness through their integrity. Knowing how to make ethical decisions will be the skill set that sets professional journalists apart.

Emerging media markets and a crumbling economy have forced journalism administrators, rightly, to re-evaluate their priorities and re-think curriculums.

In a 2004 study, one-half of journalism programs included a freestanding ethics course as either a required or an optional part of the curriculum, and more than 80 percent reported teaching ethics modules in skills or conceptual courses. Faculty in that study said a primary learning goal for ethics courses and modules was to foster moral reasoning skills. In other words they wanted to teach students how to identify ethical problems and come up with viable solutions. Both journalism administrators and faculty described ethics as essential to the curriculum.

But that was 2004, before a host of crises hit the industry. The actual impact on media ethics education is yet to be clear due to rapid change, so let me make the case for continued focus in journalism schools on ethics.

Ethics instruction must be an integral part of j-school curriculums or we will end up with Enrons in our own profession that will make the New York Times' Jayson Blair look like a minor blip. Without systematic and deliberate media ethics teaching, students will end up

adopting the ethical constructs of their corporations and fail to learn how to ask important questions.

Or, they will fly as solo entrepreneurs fighting to keep their small media businesses afloat and not even have a corporate boss to provide ethical guidance. Things won't quite feel right but they won't know why or what to do about it. Without systematic and deliberate ethics education, they won't have the critical reasoning skills as technology advances to apply ethical codes or see gaping holes where new ethics codes are needed.

### **More than cogs**

Students must have extensive multi-platform technical skills to compete in the ever-emerging media market. But without a solid foundation in ethics they will become little more than automatons operating without mind, heart or soul. It's not enough to be able to write an inverted pyramid lead and know how post it on Twitter. Professional journalists must know what those 140 Twitter-allowed characters have to do with privacy, conflict of interest, truth, fairness, promises, etc. Knowing ethics and being ethical is part of doing the job well, regardless of whether objectivity remains part of the mainstream media business model.

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aking sense of the complexities

The New York Times ethics code has more than 10,000 words, a treatise far too complex to ask a newbie to operationalize. But nowhere in all those words are there instructions on how, when or whether to quote directly from a Facebook status update. (Chances are pretty good your mother didn't teach you that either.)

Ethics instruction involves learning how to ask questions from multiple viewpoints: What are the standards that might be in

play here? Who might get hurt? Is this really the only way to achieve some greater good? Is my quest for truth trampling on other things I value? Media ethics classes can help students know what questions to ask.

### **Good teaching needed**

Clifford Christians and Edmund Lambeth, in 2004 and in their three previous studies of media ethics instruction, called for better training of ethics professors. As the newly laid-off veterans of the media industry enter the classroom, they need to bring with them more than war stories. They need a solid foundation of ethical theory to give their students an arsenal of tools for problem solving. And, professors need some understanding of the advances in brain research that show how and why the human race tends to make ethical decisions in certain ways.

Just as reporting professors need to know how to best help students learn to conduct an interview, media ethics professors also need to know to how to best train their students to do the good in addition to knowing the good.

### **Deliberate teaching needed**

As curriculums focus on new skill sets, the temptation will be great to just say media ethics will be folded into other courses. Media ethics should be taught across the curriculum and in conjunction with law, history and media literacy.

Yet the free-standing course remains the best way to present media ethics skills with necessary concentration lest it become after-thought or add-on. Ultimately, the ethos of news organizations and those who produce the news will depend on their ability to show integrity in how information is presented.

Perception of ethics then holds as much weight on the bottom line as speed of delivery and ease of access. Ultimately,

ethics courses offer the best financial hope for the future of the journalism because it is by ethics that journalists will separate themselves from everything else clamoring for public attention.

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