Journalism Ethics: The Responsible Journalist

Instructor: Karen List
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T/Th 10-11:15 (3 credits)
Office Hours: 11:30-1 T/Th
By Appointment

Course Page: responsiblejournalist.wordpress.com

Democracy dies in darkness.
--The Washington Post

I want journalism to prevail. I want all manner of any possible wrongdoing to be revealed. That’s what I want in life. That’s why I became a journalist.
--Virginian-Pilot reporter

Give voice to the voiceless and hold the powerful accountable.
--Joseph Pulitzer

Don’t expect to change the world in a day. Do it one story at a time.
--Poynter

Course Description/Learning Goals

This course focuses on responsible journalism—no matter the medium—and its pivotal role in a democratic society. Its aim is to help those who plan to become journalists make ethical decisions and to help those who are consumers of the news recognize and appreciate responsible journalism. This is a time when it is more important than ever to hold the powerful accountable and give voice to the voiceless—the heart of any good journalist’s job.

We’ll discuss foundational ethics in the areas of accuracy, fairness, diversity, relationships with sources, conflict of interest, privacy, deception and photojournalism. We’ll also discuss how individual journalists can understand and grapple with ethical challenges at a time when journalism is shifting from print/broadcast to online and when much of the mainstream media (MSM) is focused on fighting the threat of official propaganda and losing their advertising and readership to Facebook. In these difficult times, this class is about developing ethical principles--based on readings and discussion--that you can articulate and defend.
In terms of learning goals, each of you should:

- Develop an understanding of foundational ethical principles, as well as the ethical challenges faced by responsible journalists.
- Learn to identify the highest ethical principles--or lack of them--both as a professional doing your own work and as a consumer of the news.
- Against a backdrop of the current reality of journalism, develop your own ethical philosophy and ideas for living it. As Henry David Thoreau said:

  *What I begin by reading, I must finish by acting.*

The Integrative Experience

This class fulfills the Integrative Experience (IE) GenEd requirement. See the end of the syllabus for a fuller description of the IE.*

Format

This course combines short lectures with extensive discussion and in-class group work. The emphasis is on reading, reflecting, listening, discussing and writing. Although I will guide the conversation, your informed participation is essential. Assigned readings and some reflection must be done prior to class to facilitate everything else. You’ll be expected to take positions on controversial issues and to articulate those positions both in class and in your writing. Some additional focused research on your part also will be required.

No laptops or phones are allowed in class. Studies show that you and those around you learn more effectively if you take notes by hand instead of on a keyboard. I’ll outline each topic for you to help with note-taking, and I’d suggest keeping those outlines and all other class material in a binder. This class is hard work. And you have to do the work. But it’s also rewarding and fun—and it’s your chance to spend two and a half hours of face time each week with some of the most interesting, engaged people on this campus—other Journalism majors.

Expectations

These are my expectations of you.
Have a good working knowledge of the principles of journalism and of the decision-making around reporting and publishing news and of current events. You should read a major news source—such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, BBC, NPR, CNN—daily.

Be prepared to participate in a conversation that starts today and continues through the last day of class. You and I also will start a conversation this week—both in class and through your work—that we will continue through the semester and perhaps years beyond. As Parker Palmer says: *Truth is not in the conclusions so much as in the process of conversation itself . . . If you want to be in truth, you must be in the conversation.*

**Attend class.** Please let me know if you can’t be here, and make arrangements with a classmate to catch up on what you missed. If you miss more than two weeks of class, you may be asked to withdraw.

**Do assigned readings before class.** Print them, mark them up and bring them to class for reference—or take notes and bring those. Remember: no laptops or phones allowed so plan accordingly. Expect assignments related to readings and possibly quizzes.

**Participate in a meaningful way in discussion.** Spend class time focusing on the day’s topic to help create an informed and vibrant discussion.

**Be prepared for weekly in-class group work.** You’ll earn points for reflecting on questions related to the week’s topic. You must be in class to do this work, which cannot be made up.

**Check your UMass e-mail regularly.** In addition to talking in class and in person, I’ll communicate with you through your UMass e-mail account. I’ll send commentary on the class itself, written instructions for assignments, current events articles and other new materials. You also can stay current on the course page: http://responsiblejournalist.wordpress.com

**Write thoughtful papers and turn them in on time, typed and written well.** Clear directions will be given in class and by email. Late papers will not help you in discussion and are, therefore, not accepted without making prior arrangements or in case of a documented emergency. The more your work needs to be edited, the lower your score will be, so all assignments should be well written, carefully edited, typed and double-spaced. Don’t submit hand written work or email me assignments without checking with me first.

**Never fabricate, plagiarize or misrepresent your work, which in the real world is grounds for firing and in this class, grounds for failing.** The Journalism Program expects strict adherence to academic honesty, and integrity should be the hallmark of all your work. The University’s policy may be found at:

- [http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/](http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/)
Especially relevant for Journalism students are the definitions of fabrication and plagiarism in the code of conduct, which are reprinted verbatim as follows:

**FABRICATION** is the falsification or invention of any information or citation in any academic exercise.

**PLAGIARISM** is the representation of the words or ideas of another as one’s own work in any academic exercise. This includes:

- failing to properly identify direct quotations by quotation marks or appropriate indentation and formal citation
- failing to acknowledge and properly cite paraphrasing or summarizing material from another source
- failing to acknowledge and properly cite information obtained from the Internet or other electronic media as well as other sources
- submitting . . . papers written by another, [or] from . . . the internet

I hope these will be your expectations of me. That I will:

- Be prepared for every class.
- Do my best to help you make sense of the material, all of which will be interesting and relevant.
- Encourage you to do your best work.
- Evaluate that work fairly, using the highest standards. Point values of assignments will vary, but generally evaluation criteria work as follows: 100-90%: excellent in terms of critical thinking, writing, use of sources and thoroughness; 89-80% solid in terms of the above, but lacking in some way; 79-70%: Acceptable, but lacking on several of these counts; 69-60%: Lacking on almost all counts; 59% and below: Unacceptable.
- Be available to you during office hours and by e-mail to discuss Journalism Ethics specifically, the Journalism Department generally or anything else of concern to you.

**Required Readings**

- NPR Ethics Handbook
- The New Ethics of Journalism by Kelly McBride & Tom Rosenstiel (Eds.)
- Assigned Articles Listed in Weekly Outline

The McBride/Rosenstiel book is available online. It will provide context, while most of our discussion will be focused on the NPR Handbook and the assigned articles, all of which can be accessed on the course page.
Projects

Each student will:

- Attend class, participate in discussion and complete in-class exercises throughout the semester. This work will be done in class and cannot be made up (40%).

- Complete writing assignments addressing relevant issues in the course. These will include an in-class team presentation (15%) and a story analysis (15%).

- Write an end-of-semester essay based on an interview with a professional journalist currently working in the media. You will explore that journalist’s job description and ethical philosophy and assess how closely it adheres to the principles spelled out in class. This assignment is in effect a final exam, which will draw on the entire semester’s readings and class work (30%).

*Integrative Experience*

The IE is meant to provide a place where you can reflect on your own learning and explore the connections between your broad General Education courses and the more focused courses in your major. In order to facilitate that reflection, this course will ask you to think about your role as a University student, a journalist and a citizen and how your UMass education has helped shape you in those roles.

The three IE objectives are:

1) “Providing a structured, credited context for students to reflect on and to integrate their learning and experience from the broad exposure in their General Education courses and the focus in their major.” This IE goal is addressed by asking you to develop your own codes of ethics within the context of the current practice of journalism. You’ll work toward this goal through weekly readings and discussion, as well as through a series of short reflection papers focused on each topic addressed. These assignments along with the final project, an interview with a working journalist, will require you to draw on all aspects of this course in depth, as well as on your broader learning experience at the University. How has that experience—particularly your GenEd experience—helped shape the values, beliefs and expectations that inform the development of your own ethical code?

2) “Providing students with the opportunity to practice General Education learning objectives such as oral communication, collaboration, critical thinking and interdisciplinary perspective-taking, at a more advanced level.” In every class, you will be expected to articulate your thoughts on the day’s ethical issue in both small working
groups and in the class as a whole. Journalism ethics by its very nature requires critical, interdisciplinary thinking, as you will be asked to think through and answer complex questions involving fairness, diversity, relationships with sources, privacy, deception and other issues. You often will be asked to answer real-world questions about what to publish and how to publish it, honing the necessary arts of articulation, persuasion and compromise in the process.

3) "Offering students a shared learning experience for applying their prior learning to new situations, challenging questions, and real-world problems.” This class does not deal in hypotheticals but in the actual world of journalism. Each day, you will be asked to put yourself in the shoes of a working journalist who is required to think through multiple and complex ethical problems, make decisions about them and defend those decisions—in a “newsroom” with 30 other “journalists” working on the same problems.
Weekly Outline/Assigned Readings

The McBride/Rosenstiel assignments are in your textbook. The NPR Ethics Code is available as a PDF on the course page, which also provides links to the assigned articles.

If you have trouble accessing any reading, let me know.

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<tr>
<th>Introduction: January 21, 23</th>
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<td><strong>For January 21:</strong></td>
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<td>Journalism Ethics Syllabus</td>
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| **For January 23:**         |
| McBride/Rosenstiel, *New Ethics of Journalism*, Introduction |
| *NPR Ethics Handbook*, pp. 1-8 |

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<th>Ethics (in All Media) Is Everything: January 28, 30</th>
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<td><strong>For January 28:</strong></td>
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| **For January 30**                                |

**Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics**

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<tr>
<th>Journalism Rocks Democracy: February 4, 6</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>For February 4:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rob Byers, “Only You Have the Power to Save Your Local News from Corporate Vultures,” <em>Time</em>, April 14, 2018</td>
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<td><strong>For February 6:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>McBride/Rosenstiel, Chs. 3, 6, 14, Epilogue</td>
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<td>Damien Radcliffe, “Lesson learned: Seven ways news outlets can rebuild trust and sustainability,” <em>Poynter</em>, Oct. 22, 2018</td>
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| **For February 11:**                      |
| McBride/Rosenstiel, Chs. 1, 4, 10 |
**NPR Ethics Handbook**, pp. 9-17


“Editor’s Note to Our Readers,” *Newsday*, July 12, 2017

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**For February 13:**


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**For February 20, 25:**

In-Class Accuracy Presentation Assignment Due: Noon Wednesday, February 19
In Class Presentations: February 20, 25

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**Fairness, Not “Objectivity” or False Balance: February 27, March 3, 5, 10, 12**

**For February 27:**

McBride/Rosenstiel, Ch. 2

**NPR Ethics Handbook**, pp. 18-31

Margaret Sullivan, “This week should put the nail in the coffin for ‘both sides’ journalism,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 16, 2017


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**For March 3:**

**Fairness in Government Reporting: Skepticism, Not Stenography!**


Michael Calderone, “Can the media manage the Iran narrative,” *Politico*, Jan. 7, 2020


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**For March 5:**

**Fairness to Individuals**

“Judging Jewell,” *ESPN Films*


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**For March 10:**

**Fairness in Rape/Sexual Harassment Coverage**


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**For March 12:**

In-Class *She Said* Presentations

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**Source/Reporter Relationships: March 24, 26**

**For February 24:**

McBride/Rosenstiel, Ch. 9

*NPR Ethics Handbook*, pp. 55-61

Jack Shafer, “The source may be anonymous, but the shame is all yours,” blogs.reuters.com, June 18, 2014

Perry Bacon, “When to Trust a Story that Uses Unnamed Sources,” fivethirtyeight, July 18, 2017

For March 26:

Story Analysis Assignment Due in Class

Practice Interview with a Working Journalist

Diversity: March 31, April 2

For March 31

People of Color:

McBride/Rosenstiel, Ch. 13


Tanzina Vega, “How newsrooms can stop being so white,” CNN Money, Dec. 16, 2016

For April 2

Coverage of Women:
Margaret Sullivan, “Roger Ailes’s lasting legacy for women workers is one he would have hated,” Washington Post, May 18, 2017


Karen K. Ho and Jon Allsop, “How the media covers its own Weinsteins,” Columbia Journalism Review, Nov. 6, 2017

Margaret Sullivan, “Abusive media moguls harmed more than just individual women. They shaped a misogynistic culture,” Washington Post, Sept. 13, 2018

Margaret Sullivan, “One news anchor decided to put more women on air. Now his idea has gone global,” Washington Post, May 15, 2019

Conflicts of Interest: April 7, 9 (14)

For April 7:

McBride/Rosenstiel, Ch. 8

NPR Ethics Handbook, pp. 32-50

Margaret Sullivan, “Mike Bloomberg just stabbed the journalistic heart of his news organization,” Washington Post, Nov. 25, 2019

For April 9:

Miriam Jordan, “For Immigration Reporters, Objectivity and Compassion Don’t Have to Be Mutually Exclusive,” New York Times, July 22, 2018

Declan Walsh, “In Yemen, Lavish Meals for Few, Starvation for Many and a Dilemma for Reporters,” New York Times, Nov. 29, 2018


Alexandria Neason, “Must aid be an ethical dilemma?” Columbia Journalism Review, Feb. 19, 2019
### Privacy and Deception: April 16, 21 (23)

**For April 16**

**Privacy: Private v. Public People**

McBride/Rosenstiel, Ch. 12


**For April 21**

**Deception**

NPR Ethics Handbook, pp. 62-68

Jack Shafer, “Is It Ever OK for Journalists to Deceive?” *Politico*, Nov. 30, 2017

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### Photojournalism: April 28

**For April 28:**

McBride/Rosenstiel, Ch.5


Kristen Hare, “5 questions to ask before publishing graphic images,” *Poynter*, July 17, 2014

Daryl Frost, “Kavanaugh hearing highlights the power of photo editors,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, Fall 2018

Tim Elfrink and Fred Barbash, “These children are barefoot. In diapers. Choking on tear gas,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 26, 2018

**Final Interviews Due in Class/Discussed April 30**