Media Ethics at Work
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Preface

During the first week of my media ethics courses, I show the students my blog, www.iwantu2boutraged.blogspot.com, and point out posts about recent ethical lapses by people working in the media professions. As the semester progresses and students follow new blog posts, a pattern emerges: Students show much more interest in the cases involving student media or young professionals than they do in the well-publicized cases involving experienced professionals at major organizations. As they’re working to develop their own standards, students want to discuss the actions of their peers. The question “What would you have done?” leads to lively debate.

When Whitehouse and McPherson noted in a Journal of Mass Media Ethics article that media ethics casebooks “ask media ethics students to take the dramatic mental leap from being undergraduates preparing for their first jobs to becoming leaders of companies,” co-editor Guy Reel and I thought they had a good point. We believe too many books present students with the kinds of ethics cases faced by experienced media managers rather than the kinds young people are likely to encounter in school or in an internship or first job. “Students need cases reflecting issues faced by entry-level media professionals,” Whitehouse and McPherson concluded. “They must know how to take responsibility for their own ethical decisions, and they must be able to express their views from low positions of power.”

This book provides those entry-level cases along with the tools to help students reason through them. In these pages, authors tell the true stories of young media professionals who struggled with an ethical dilemma early in their careers in public relations, advertising and print, broadcast and online journalism. These young people face a wide range of difficult choices. Some are perennials, such as what to do when a source tries to “take back” what he’s told you for a story or when you discover that your supervisor is manipulating figures in publicity material. Others are permutations for the digital age: for instance, whether it’s OK to go online pretending to be someone else, or whether to remove a story from a Web archive at a source’s request.

Much has been written about the ethical lapses of young professionals in the fast-paced, increasingly competitive media world. Classic high-profile cases
involved Jayson Blair, formerly of The New York Times; Stephen Glass, formerly of The New Republic; and Janet Cooke, formerly of The Washington Post. These young writers lied, fabricated stories, embarrassed their news organizations and damaged the credibility of everyone working in the media. They knew what they were doing was wrong, but they did it anyway.

In contrast to those extreme cases, most of the young people featured in this book—like many young professionals—had good instincts. When confronted with an ethical issue, they wanted nothing more than to do the right thing. They just weren’t sure what the right thing might be or when to trust their instincts.

The underlying issues in the dilemmas encountered by young professionals—dishonesty, bias, sensationalism, conflict of interest—are the same issues that continue to pose challenges throughout any media career. The difference is that younger professionals, with their limited experiences in the working world, may not recognize the ethical dimensions of a situation before they barrel ahead and act in whatever way seems appropriate at the moment.

Even when they do recognize an ethical dilemma, young professionals have fewer resources to draw on. The issue may seem far too big to tackle—never mind resolve—from their entry-level position in the organization. They’re not sure what questions they should ask, whom they should ask or when they should ask them. They may feel ill-equipped to brainstorm about options for action beyond the first ones that come to mind. Not wanting to look ignorant, they might not have the courage to speak at all.

That’s where this book’s true stories play a role. Written in a narrative style, the chapters take readers through ethical dilemmas as they actually unfolded—from the perspective of the young person involved and with only the information available to him or her at each point. Readers can stop at each stage and reflect on the questions “What would I do if this happened to me?” or “What alternative might have worked?” As they follow the case and discover how the young professional resolved the situation, readers will develop strategies and patterns of thought that will better prepare them for their own inevitable ethical dilemmas.

Because the issues these young professionals encountered cross over all media professions, the chapters are arranged not by profession but by theme: honesty, sensitivity and balance. The cases can be assigned in any order; create your own path through the material by following the connections you want your students to make. For instance, you can look for cases that resemble something currently in the news, or choose a case to discuss via the philosophical theory recently discussed in class.
I highly recommend during the first week of classes pointing out recent ethical dilemmas being reported in the news before tackling theory. (Creating a blog as I did provides an easy place to continually post news of dilemmas as you learn about them.) Most students don’t realize how widespread these issues are and how damaging they can be to their chosen profession. In my experience, they become more willing—even eager—to tackle the decision-making tools that will help them with their own dilemmas in the future.

Depending on how you teach the media ethics course, this book can work as a primary text or a supplement. As a stand-alone text, it offers enough content for a semester-long course with its explanations of the Western ethical theories typically taught in media ethics courses, discussion of what ethics codes can and can’t do and examination of moral development. It also offers 23 cases involving young people, something no other media ethics textbook does, many of them addressing the ethical complications resulting from new technology. Because you can choose the cases you want to discuss as a class, the book can be a good supplemental text for a media ethics course, backing up whatever primary text you might use.

In introductory courses, such as media writing or public relations, the book can work as a supplement. Although in these lower-level courses you might not cover all the decision-making tools discussed in the first chapter, exploring some of the cases will help alert students to the principles of their professions and to the situations they might encounter in the working world, providing fodder for discussion. Of course, teaching the beginning skills of writing a press release or a news report is important, but it’s also important simultaneously to begin students’ understanding of ethics in their fields.

If you do use this as your main text, you’ll find easy-to-understand explanations of Aristotle’s Doctrine of the Mean (virtue), Kant’s Categorical Imperative (duty), Mill’s principle of utility, John Rawls’ theory of justice and more. Each theory includes examples of how it might apply today to the work of a media professional. You may want to spend more time on some sections of the decision-making chapter, asking students to read the original texts by the philosophers mentioned. Many websites provide these readings at no cost, and putting copies of original readings on reserve at the library is always an option.

Codes of ethics are discussed in this chapter as a good starting point for young professionals. You can also opt to work through any case with your students by choosing an ethical theory and showing how it can provide a deeper answer than the principles stated in a code. In each case chapter, a “Tool for Thought” box highlights a certain code or theory, showing one way to deliberate the case.
However you approach ethical theory, we do not recommend covering all the theories in one class session or sitting—or even in one week of classes. Discuss a theory, then choose a case in the book, and the chapter does not necessarily have to cite that specific theory. Work through the case using the theory recently discussed and those previously discussed; keep building from there. Chapter 2 takes you through the stages from early ethical decision making to moral sophistication, as illustrated by the story of a young reporter who found herself in a clash between her own ethics and those of the profession, ultimately creating an opportunity for self-reflection and moral growth. The example helps students see themselves in her dilemma.

Within the case chapters, additional features offer more perspectives. “Thinking It Through” questions help students review the case and the actions of the young person involved. In some chapters, a “Tool for Action” box provides practical tips, such as how to report on suicide or how to use blog posts in a news story. Chapters also include related Web links for more information, and an appendix lists the Web addresses of all the ethics codes referred to in the case chapters. Finally, in each case chapter a “What If?” scenario offers a related situation designed to push readers’ thinking about the issues further. Unlike the true stories that are the center of each chapter, these “What If?” cases have no resolution, leaving the decision making to the reader.

We also recruited some professionals to reflect about ethical dilemmas in their workplace—past and present. Titled “First-Person Ethics,” the 11 pieces briefly discuss situations these pros encountered and how they dealt with them, for better or for worse. They are included to show students that dilemmas will happen, no matter how “seasoned” or experienced they become.

All the stories told in the 23 case chapters are true; the chapter authors obtained the information, including a summary of the thinking process, directly from the young professional involved. When we began soliciting contributions for the book, we planned to use only real names of people and companies. Doing so, however, did not prove possible in every chapter. In some cases, the young professional still works with some of the people who made questionable decisions and, thus, must be cautious about reflecting on these decisions publicly. In others, the entry-level employee was not in a position to know the full reasoning behind a company’s or individual’s chosen course of action, and the people involved have left; thus, background could not be checked to the degree required to eliminate libel concerns. In each chapter in which names have been changed, a note at the end of the introductory summary clearly says so and explains the reason. If you see no such note, the names are all real.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The book editors wish to thank Charisse Kiino, publisher, for believing in the importance of this book and also our development editor, Jane Harrigan, for helping us create an even better book than we imagined.

Peck would like to thank her mentors for being influential in the way she teaches media ethics today. They include Garrett Ray, former media ethics professor, Colorado State University; Bob Steele, Poynter Institute’s Values Scholar; Jay Black, former Poynter-Jamison Chair in Media Ethics at University of South Florida; and Clifford Christians, media ethics scholar, University of Illinois. She would also like to thank her professors in Ohio University’s graduate philosophy program for helping her understand more thoroughly ethical theory.

Reel would like to thank his colleagues at Winthrop University, including Drs. Lawrence Timbs and William Click, and former student Christy Mullins Deines, now a reporter at the Herald-Times, serving Bloomington, Ind.

We benefitted greatly from reviewers who gave us feedback on both our proposal and plans for the book, as well as the complete draft manuscript. Thanks to all of them for their invaluable suggestions, which we’ve worked hard to incorporate into the final product:

Shannon Bowen, Syracuse University
Chris Burnett, California State University, Long Beach
Bernard Debatin, Ohio University
Pam Fine, University of Kansas
Mike McDevitt, University of Colorado
Nancy Mitchell, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Maria Moore, Illinois State University
George Padgett, Elon University
Tony Pederson, Southern Methodist University
Kevin Stoker, Texas Tech University
Lorna Veraldi, Florida International University
Ed Wasserman, Washington & Lee University
Bu Zhong, Pennsylvania State University
We hope this unique book helps your students find the guidance and courage they need to make ethical decisions and thus do their part to maintain high standards in the news and persuasion media. With the basics in hand and with the practice the book offers, students and young professionals can connect what’s learned from reading and class discussion with the changing realities they’ll face.

Today’s fast-paced, ever-changing media scene makes finding the ethical course of action more difficult—not just for new professionals but sometimes for their bosses as well. If young people can enter the workforce with an ethical framework built on sound theory and moral reasoning, they won’t instantly know what to do in every situation, but they’ll be agile enough and confident enough to reason through it.

—Lee Anne Peck

NOTES

1. I receive daily Google Alerts for the terms “media ethics,” “journalism ethics,” “public relations ethics” and “advertising ethics” for finding current ethical dilemmas, both national and international, for my class blog.


3. Ibid.
Introduction

Immediately after his spring 2001 graduation from an Ohio university, Curtis Benton was offered full-time work at a small-circulation afternoon newspaper in Pennsylvania. He was thrilled to get his first job in the industry as a general assignment reporter; he started in July.

A few days after the events of Sept. 11, 2001, an editor assigned Benton to cover a flag-raising at a closed Perkins restaurant. The chain is known for flying large U.S. flags, and Benton was told that the building owner wanted to resume the tradition. When he arrived at the closed restaurant, however, Benton realized that the assignment wasn’t news; it was a fabrication. The owner of the building was a regular advertiser with the newspaper. After the terrorist attacks, one of the paper’s ad sales reps had come up with the idea for the building’s owner to raise the flag.

Because the flag was so big, Benton was asked to assist with the unfurling. “The photographer even caught a few shots of me helping with the flag before it went up,” he said. As he returned to the newsroom, Benton recalled later, “I felt a mixture of embarrassment, anger and annoyance.” He knew the flag-raising had happened only because the ad rep suggested it; in short, he felt as if he’d been set up.

After pondering his situation, Benton told his editor that he would complete his assignment and write the nonstory, but “I would refuse to put my byline on it.” He explained to the editor, “It was my job to perform the work of the paper, but I was disappointed the paper was creating news by lauding an advertiser’s ‘patriotism.’”

The editor allowed Benton to withhold his byline but did not indicate that he had any problem with the story or photo, both of which were published in the next day’s paper. Benton did not feel good about this kind of “reporting.” As days went by, he began to question the entire news-gathering process at the paper.

“I hoped my editor would understand my concerns, but I felt like an alien for broaching the ethics of the assignment,” he said. “The situation was extremely offensive to me because of the exploitation of a tragedy to make an advertiser look good.” If the editor accepted this kind of staged event as news,
Benton asked himself, what other journalistic standards might he (Benton) have to compromise in order to keep working there?

“I began to wonder if my bosses would support a reporter in cases that involved recanting sources or a libel lawsuit,” he said.

What to do? He needed the job, but he also needed to uphold his principles. He quit.

Did Benton do the right thing? If you think he did, how would you explain that decision to co-workers, friends and family? If you think Benton made a bad decision, what might he have done instead?

These are the kind of questions you’ll be asking yourself, and learning to answer, as you read this book. They’re also the kind you might encounter—if you haven’t already—while working in student media or doing an internship, or in your first job as a young media professional. As your career begins, you might face issues similar to these:

- What do I tell an editor who wants to sensationalize or unrealistically cut my copy?
- What if a PR client wants me to omit facts or lie in a press release?
- What if I’m asked to stretch the truth in ad copy?

Of course, people who have worked in the media for years face similar dilemmas. The difference is that when you’re new to a job, it’s harder to recognize an ethical challenge when you see it and harder to know what to do. You’re just learning about your profession in general and your employer in particular. If you want to voice your concerns, whom do you talk to and when? What exactly are you trying to say? Being new to a profession means you’re learning new skills—and moral reasoning needs to be one of those skills.

This book presents stories of young people who had to wrestle with an ethical dilemma at the beginning of their careers in the news or persuasion media. By following along as these young media professionals make their choices, you’ll begin to understand how to ask yourself questions, envision alternatives and justify the decisions you make.

All the stories in the book are true. The authors of the chapters know the individuals involved and have interviewed them to get details on what they thought and did as they tried to resolve their ethical dilemma. We had hoped to use real names throughout the book, and about half the chapters do use them. However, ethical issues involve debate and controversy, and sometimes it’s not possible to tell a complex story from one person’s point of view without making others look bad in ways that may not be fair. Therefore, in some cases,
including the story of Curtis Benton in this introduction, the young media professional has asked us to change the names of people and companies.

As you read each chapter, ask yourself how you would have responded in that situation. Right now, you have the luxury of deliberating cases in the classroom with your peers or in the comfort of a reading chair in your room. Practicing ethical thinking now will better prepare you for making decisions later in the craziness of deadlines at a news organization, ad agency or PR firm.

Before you get to the cases, you’ll find a chapter that covers philosophical theories and codes of ethics. These decision-making tools will help you not only with your discussions of how the young professionals in the cases acted, but also with your future deliberations in the workplace. We encourage you to explore original readings of philosophers mentioned and to read the entire codes, too. Chapter 2 then offers insight into how one builds character via moral development; it includes the story of young woman who had to make tough choices about the way she approached her job.

Because the problems encountered by the young professionals in the book—including dishonesty, bias, sensationalism and conflict of interest—could happen in any media workplace, you’ll find the chapters organized not by profession but by types of issues. Even if you don’t plan to be a public relations practitioner, for instance, you can learn from the situations a PR professional encounters and how he or she handles them. Plus, it always helps to get acquainted with the tasks done in other professions as you enter the working world. To balance the tales from beginners, the book includes shorter “First-Person Ethics” pieces in which more experienced media professionals detail a tough decision and how they dealt with it.

Within the case chapters, you’ll find “Tool for Thought” boxes that show how certain theories or codes could be applied to the situation in the chapter. Sometimes the boxes use a combination of tools because when you deliberate a dilemma, more than one way of thinking may help. You’ll also find a variety of other features among the chapters, including discussion questions, Web links and quick tips on practical matters such as whether it’s OK to report information you found on Facebook.

This book will help you build professional character, and part of building character is realizing that you’re going to make mistakes. Benton, for example, wonders now whether leaving his first reporting job because of the staged flag-raising was the best move.

“As I’ve gotten older, I catch myself sometimes questioning whether I made too rash of a decision to quit,” he said years later, when he was working for a
much larger paper. “It was a tough job market, I only had a few months of professional experience and I later realized that I’m frequently frustrated by newsroom scenarios where you worry about the ethics or legitimacy of a story or source and an editor has a different opinion.”

Young people who encounter a work-related ethical dilemma usually recognize that what they’re doing isn’t right but often do it anyway for a variety of reasons: not wanting to look stupid, not having the courage to confront or confide in supervisors or just not knowing how to think through the dilemma or explain their reasoning. Helping you learn to deal with these roadblocks is why we compiled this book.

From your first day on the job, you’re as responsible as anyone for the work your organization produces. Professionalism includes taking that responsibility. When you’re the intern or the “new kid,” obviously you don’t want to lecture people who have twice your experience in how to do their jobs. But if you have questions, it’s your responsibility to ask them.

It’s never safe to assume the questions will be asked and answered somewhere higher up the line. The pace of change in today’s media means that when ethical issues arise, even your boss may not be sure what to do. Each professional is the architect of his or her own credibility, and each individual’s credibility is key to establishing the credibility of the media as a whole. If you can build your ethical framework on sound theory and moral reasoning, you won’t instantly know what to do about every situation that develops, but you’ll be agile enough and confident enough to reason through it.

Think of learning to recognize and reason through an ethical issue as part of your professional development. As Aristotle would say, practice moral reasoning! If you discuss cases thoroughly with colleagues or classmates now, you’ll be better prepared to effectively argue your positions in the working world.