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JOURNALISM ETHICS CLASSES: DO THEY MAKE BETTER JOURNALISTS?

At the turn of the 21st century, nearly all university journalism programs in America offer free-standing courses in ethics or integrate ethics teaching into skills courses. The Journal of Mass Media Ethics is 16 years old; Brill's Content, Columbia Journalism Review and American Journalism Review are steeped in ethics content and are must-reads for most professionals in the fields think-tanks like the Poynter Institute and The American Press Institute offer workshops and short courses in ethics for working reporters and editors; and the Society of Professional Journalists distributes its Code of Ethics and endorses an online ethics discussion group.

Yet media muck-ups, abuses of journalistic privilege and situations of questionable ethical conduct in news gathering and reporting continue.

Published and electronic outlets are full of examples that should make news managers wince. Remember, for example, that in the popular version of the Elian Gonzalez rescue, a school of dolphins protected the boy until a fisherman rescued him. In fact, said NBC News correspondent Keith Morrison, the animals were dolphin game fish -- not the mammal personifed by "Flipper" -- and the "fisherman" had never gone fishing before that day. Reporters and news directors seemed to choose telling a good story over ethical reporting. News organizations down the food chain repeated the narrative without checking it out.

Should we assume that none of the journalists involved with the Elian coverage took an ethics course, or is there more to it, just as therewas more to the Elian story? Should ethics courses equate to more ethical practice? What is reasonable to expect from two decades of serious attention to journalism ethics?

Journalism ethics educators hope their students will become ethical practitioners, of course. But making journalists into good people is not necessarily the goal of journalism ethics instruction; instead, most educators say they focus on teaching students to make sound decisions.

In Garrett Ray's ethics courses at Colorado State University, he works to teach students to make more ethical decisions on deadline. Ray uses the classical theories of Aristotle, Confucius, Mill and others as well as several

methods of ethical decision-making. He makes connections to professional practice on both the micro-level (is it ethical to steal a document that I think contains information the public should know?) and on the macro-level (what are the implications for freedom of information in the growing concentration of media ownership?). Ray says his students begin to see how these theories and processes lead directly to better decision-making in real situations that students will encounter in the newsroom.

And that's what journalism ethics courses ought to be doing, according to Peggy Kuhr, managing editor of The Spokesman Review in Spokane, Wash. They should be teaching critical thinking and identification of ethical issues. Journalism ethics instructors do not have the responsibility of creating "good" practitioners, but she sees the impact of ethics instruction in today's newsroom. "There's a lot more day-today discussion now [of ethics]" she said."I think that reporters are more aware than they were in the past" When an ethical problem emerges in the newsroom,"it is not the first time that they've heard about it."

Other journalism educators believe that courses should contain a solid philosophical underpinning and, at the same time, emphasize the development of skills in ethical analysis. To do this, Ralph Barney of Brigham Young University says that stand-alone ethics courses are essential. Historically, Barney says, journalism ethics training was integrated into professional skills or law courses. It relied too much on the common practices and accepted values of the newsroom environment, and students were rarely asked to question the foundations of those beliefs. Perhaps the biggest problem with this approach, according to Barney, is that it centered on what journalists should do in their narrow world -- with the audience only vaguely implied and almost never discussed.

"A stand-alone ethics course should begin with discussion of the role and function of the media in society and proceed from there with all decisions relating back to that function or role and all principles serving the function rather than the form." Barney said. "An appropriate course in journalism ethics should -- in recognition that the First Amendment changes the general rules for professional ethics and ethics codes -- teach journalists how to maintain their independence but to recognize ethical questions and use reason and principle to make ethical decisions."

What differences is this 20-year-old emphasis on ethics making in the practice of journalism? Have journalists become "better" because of it?

No, says Kuhr; journalists still make ethical mistakes. But she blames the new technology and urgency created by the Web and live television broadcasts that lead journalists into rushed and sometimes unethical judgments.

David Hawpe, vice president and editorial director of The Louisville Courier-Journal, said journalism is better because of the focus on ethics instruction. "I think that we are much keener on ethical issues than we were in the past" he said. "We are most sensitive to them, we are more alert to them. We have more skill in dealing with them than in the past."

And for Hawpe, who also teaches journalism courses, newsroom mistakes provide learning opportunities for students. "I think that they need to know that even esteemed practitioners make mistakes," he said.

After the Courier-Journal ran a front page photo that was, in hindsight, an unnecessary surprise to a grieving widow, Hawpe said," I instituted a rule that we call people in those circumstances and alert them and explain why we feel compelled to run the picture. When you share your mistakes with students, you can demonstrate that it is possible to do things different."

Many educators and newsroom professionals agree that two decades of ethics instruction has resulted in better newsroom discussions.

"Journalists are talking more than ever before about why they do what they do," said Greg Luft of Colorado State University.

Luft's class recently visited a television station in Denver where the management team, anchors, producer and director held a debriefing to discuss a decision they made not to lead with a particular story. The story involved a woman who verbally attacked the police department for shooting her husband -- in her opinion, unnecessarily. The evidence suggested the police were justified in their action, so the station omitted the story. Its competitor, on the other hand, led with it. Although the staff felt they probably lost viewers, they were confident that the decision was the right one.

Though ethics instruction has resulted in more newsroom conversations, those conversations do not always go as far as they should to fully examine the ethics of everyday journalism.

"It's difficult to change people from doing what they know and to get them to examine new ideas," Barney said. "Journalists are no exception."

While some newsrooms have experimented with ways to formalize a system of ethics, few institutions have been directly affected by the increase of ethics instruction. "The indirect effects have to do with what I think are more frequent discussions of ethics when specific instances Arise," Barney said. "Principled discussion is complex, while war stories and declarations are relatively simple. The complex will take time to displace the simplistic and traditional."

And, in the deadline-to-deadline world of the newsroom, the reality is that students and professors have the luxury of time to examine ethical questions.

"On the whole, students in an upper division ethics class have had more exposure to systematic thinking about ethics than almost any reporter or editor," said Ray.

While ethics education seems to be slowly making strides toward creating more ethical practice in the newsroom, some problems still need to be addressed. The first of these is the perceived disconnect between academics and professionals. "I think the divide between 'working' journalists and 'ivory tower' philosophers is still very real," said Tom Bivins of the University of Oregon. "I really believe working journalists are often blinded by the very routine of news gathering and the heavy socialization that takes place when they enter the field. They imagine they have no time to contemplate ethics."

William Babcock, director of the Silha Center of Media Ethics and Law at The University of Minnesota, finds fault with both academics and professionals. "The profession still is reluctant to reach out and/or admit that it needs help," he said. And "academics don't try hard enough to make their work meaningful to professionals."

Finding a bridge may be the solution. To make ethics education translate into more than just rhetoric when it gets into the field takes individuals who know both worlds -- the academy and the newsroom.

Two decades of journalism education is truly only a moment in time when considering the history of the field. More universities have practitioner/educators such as Kuhr and Hawpe, who have years of newsroom experience and a solid understanding of theoretical ethics. More journalism educators spend time working in newsrooms. Journalism schools are sending out a steady stream of young reporters who have formal ethics training. And, 20 years after journalism ethics began to be embraced in a serious way throughout the country, we are coming into a period when journalists with formal ethics training hold positions of management. Only when news managers are comfortable with modeling and reinforcing sophisticated ethical analysis can we start to see the full effects of efforts in journalism ethics education.

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