

Professional Ethics in Magazine Publishing (WP 677)
Fall 2007
Division of Writing, Literature, and Publishing

Class Time: Monday, 6 to 9:45 p.m.

Class Location: T201 (180 Tremont)

Instructor: Jeffrey L. Seglin

Office: 180 Tremont Street, Room 1224

Telephone: 617-824-8240 (Emerson office)

Email: jeffrey_seglin@emerson.edu

Office Hours: Monday, 10:45-11:45 a.m., 3:45-5:45 p.m., and by appointment

Course Description

This course is designed to give students an understanding of the ethical decisions editors and writers face in magazine publishing. We'll cover topics ranging from codes of ethics and truth telling to how a story gets reported and edited and the social responsibility of the magazine to its various constituents.

The course will draw on current issues in magazine publishing and related media as well as readings and class discussions to explore the ethics behind the decisions that take place in magazine publishing.

There will be individual and group presentations, as well as hands-on exercises in class.

The class will be run as a seminar. Doing all of the readings for each class is essential.

Course Objectives

- To gain an understanding of the ethical decision-making that goes on within a magazine, both as an editorial publication and as a business.
- To examine how people evaluate issues involving human conduct and moral conflict.
- To make the connections between how individuals operate in their private lives and how they are challenged by life in business, in this case a magazine business.
- To create an awareness about the consequences of decisions.
- To develop critical thinking skills necessary to analyze moral and ethical issues from multiple perspectives.
- To learn to use ethical decision-making skills, understanding that rather than finding stark right or wrong answers to issues, you are often faced with choosing the best right solution among many right choices.

Course Requirements

Two short opinion essays and presentations (25% of final grade)

- Each essay (maximum 800 words) should take a stance on a specific ethical issue in magazine publishing related to the topic and readings due on the short essay due date. They should have a strong viewpoint and clear theme.
- Each student is responsible for distributing his or her short essay to the rest of class and leading a discussion about it on the evening it is due.
- Individual due dates will be assigned the first day of class.

Class discussion and participation (30% of final grade)

- Students are expected to complete all of the reading assigned for each class and to contribute to class discussion, regardless of whether they have a specific presentation due. They are also expected to participate in occasional in-class exercises.
- Twice during the semester, each student will briefly discuss a topical issue relevant to that week's discussion drawn from a print or online publication. Students should bring enough copies of the topical piece for the entire class. If there's an online version, email it to the class a couple of days in advance or provide a link on the class blog.
- Dates for these topical presentations will be assigned the first day of class.

- Twice during the semester, each student will be responsible for leading part of the discussion and analysis of the assigned readings for the week. This will take some coordination with other students scheduled to lead the discussion for the same class.
- Dates for these readings presentations will be assigned the first day of class.

Final paper & presentation (25% of final grade)

- The final paper (1,200-2,000 words) should be written as an article suitable for a publication such as *Media Ethics Magazine*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *American Journalism Review*, or Poynter.org focusing on an ethical issue in magazine publishing. Appropriate research, interviews with knowledgeable sources, and clearly articulated point of view should be included where necessary.
- The final presentation should be based on your final paper: the topic you chose, how it relates to class, the points you are raising in your paper, how it fits with your intended target publication, and any other relevant points you want to raise should be included.
- Final project topic must be chosen and turned in no later than October 29.
- Final papers & presentations are due December 3. No papers accepted after this date.

Group Projects (20% of final grade)

- Blog – students are expected to contribute to online class discussion forum (<http://wp677.blogspot.com>).
- In-class debate on December 10 – will involve group preparation ahead of class time.

Attendance and Grading Policy

Attendance is required. Missed classes will affect your grade. More than 2 unexcused absences will result in a failing grade. (Absences are unexcused unless cleared with professor at least two hours prior to class.)

If a piece of factual information (spelling of person's or place's name, inconsistency in details, and so on) is discovered to be incorrect in any assignment that is handed in, it may result in a failing grade for that column. Proof-reading and doubling-checking facts is essential.

All work should be original. Information used from other sources should be clearly indicated. Failure to make such attributions will result in a failing grade.

Texts

There are four required texts for this class:

Sissela Bok's *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*

Stephen L. Carter's *Integrity*

Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and William Damon's *Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet*

Janet Malcolm's *The Journalist and the Murderer*

There will also be additional readings assigned prior to each class meeting.

If you want to get a sense of my thinking on ethical decision making, *The Good, the Bad, and Your Business: Choosing Right When Ethical Dilemmas Pull You Apart* as well as *The Right Thing: Conscience, Profit and Personal Responsibility in Today's Business* are recommended reading. *The Right Thing* is a collection of *New York Times* ethics columns which you should be able to find through Lexis-Nexis or on nytimes.com without being charged.

For material for the weekly topical reports, you might consult: www.poynter.org/romenesko, www.cjr.org, www.ajr.org, www.mediabistro.com, www.iwantmedia.com, or links to other sites from these websites. But you certainly shouldn't limit yourself to these sites.

Calendar

1

September 10. Introduction to the class. Why we're here, and what we'll do. Some thoughts on ethical decision-making, critical thinking, mission statements, right and wrong, and the rule of ethics in magazine publishing. Assignment of short presentation dates.

2

September 17. Values, Visions, and Codes. Why have a code of ethics when we're all good people trying to do a good job? The difference between values and goals. **Due:** Read assigned readings. Readings presentations. Short essay presentations. Topical reports to class.

3

September 24. A Sense of Who You Are. What are the ethics of the reporter/writer and do they always coincide with the ethics of your organization? How to make individual decisions in real life business. Plus a look at sexism, racism, celebrity culture, scoops, muckraking, gifts, junkets, and finding a sense of integrity. **Due:** Read *Integrity*, plus assigned readings. Readings presentations. Short essay presentations. Topical reports to class.

4

October 1. The New and the New New Journalism. How do style, voice, and fictional techniques affect the ethics of magazine editors and writers? What hell, if any, has been wrought by the new journalism that's now more than a quarter-century old? **Due:** Read Tom Wolfe's "The New Journalism" essay and assigned readings. Readings presentations. Short essay presentations. Topical reports to class.

Monday, October 8. Columbus Day. No Class.

5

Tuesday, October 9. Full Disclosure. When to withhold and when withholding crosses the line. Do you have an ethical obligation to your subject, your reader, your writer, your editor, your <your noun here>, yourself? And how do you decide among conflicting responsibilities? **Due:** Read *The Journalist and the Murderer*, plus assigned readings. Readings presentations. Short essay presentations. Topical reports to class.

6

October 15. Workplace Warriors. An examination of writers and editors as employees and managers in the workplace. Privacy issues, employee rights, treatment of employees, and duties to the organization. **Due:** Read *Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet* (skip chapters 4-6 on genetics); assigned chapters from *The Right Thing* book; plus assigned readings. Readings presentations. Short essay presentations. Topical reports to class.

7

October 22. Truth Telling. What is the value of truth? A look at truth dumping, radical honesty, editorial tricks and miscues, digitally manipulated photographs, when a sense of righteousness goes too far, and whether and how you can tell the truth without losing your story or your job. **Due:** Read *Lying*, plus assigned readings. Readings presentations. Short essay presentations. Topical reports to class.

8

October 29. Social Responsibility. Who is personally responsible for the actions of a magazine? A corporation? Should a magazine have a social responsibility greater than the sum of the individual participants' responsibilities? Should a corporation? Do magazines or corporations owe anything back to the communities in which they operate? A look at stakeholders, conflicts of interest, and so on. **Due:** Read assigned readings. Readings presentations. Short essay presentations. Topical reports to class. **CHOICE OF FINAL PAPER TOPIC DUE.**

9

November 5. Advertising, or: What Business Are You Really In? The separation of church (edit) and state (advertising), or, serving many masters. If you're an editor or writer, are you really in the business of selling advertising? How money makes the magazine go around and what happens to your ethics in the process. **Due:** Read assigned readings. Readings presentations. Short essay presentations. Topical reports to class.

Monday, November 12. Veteran's Day. No Class.

10

November 19.

The Actions and Consequences of Corporations. A look at conglomerates, mergers, frenzies, greed, good business decisions gone bad, and what happened to the writing and editing you thought you'd be doing. **Due:** Read assigned readings. Readings presentations. Short essay presentations. Topical reports to class. **CHOICE OF DEBATE TOPICS.**

11

November 26.

Values, Visions, and Codes Revisited. **Due:** Read assigned readings. Readings presentations. Topical reports to class. **CHOICE OF DEBATE TEAMS.**

12

December 3.

Final Papers and Presentations Due.

13

December 10.

The Great Debates, wherein the class squares off in an impressive bout of critical thinking. Dress accordingly. **Due:** Write-up of group argument for debate.

14

Saturday, December 15, 6 p.m.–7:45 p.m.

FINAL EXAM PERIOD MEETING

The Big Questions. Based on material studied in class, readings, topical issues, presentations, and other source material, what are the three most important ethical issues facing magazine publishing today? **Due:** Based on review of *Lying, Integrity, Good Work, The Journalist and the Murderer, The Right Thing*, assigned readings, and other material come up with your personal list. No later than Thursday, December 13th at 6 p.m., submit by e-mail a two-page write-up of your list, and be prepared for discussion.

The above schedule and procedures are subject to change at the whim of the professor or as a result of student insurrection. Students will be updated on any such changes each week in class. "Assignments" are due on the date on which they're listed above.

If you believe you have a disability that may warrant accommodations in this class, please register with the Disability Services Coordinator, Dr. Anthony Bashir, at 216 Tremont Street, 5th Floor (824-7415) He can work with you to develop methods of addressing needed accommodations.