

# Journalism Ethics in the Digital Age

The American news media has seldom been held in lower esteem by the public. This partly comes from a sense that professional standards have dropped. The digital age, where publishing and broadcasting information have proliferated far beyond daily newspapers and radio and television stations, only complicates these dynamics of mistrust. Corrupted information and half-truths seem to be everywhere, many citizens sense, and news media outlets – like almost all large institutions in today’s society – face increasing skepticism.

A crucial question, then, looms for those studying journalism and training to become reporters and editors: What distinguishes the professional journalist’s approach to information amid vast other digital streams of videos, photos, data and text? In large part, the answer must be the highest of ethical standards and a commitment to the uncorrupted pursuit of truth based on verifiable facts and knowledge.

We stand at a moment when the journalistic ethical codes that American society has known for decades are now are under tremendous pressure, as the underlying business model continues to erode, news and information are increasingly consumed in personalized ways on commercial platforms, and every journalistic story must compete for attention amid an overwhelming sea of what is generically being called “content.” Meanwhile, the number of U.S. editorial workers has been nearly cut in half over the past few decades; there are now about four public relations persons for every journalist. Preserving an ethical core, and seeking to improve upon the checkered past of reporting, is no sure or easy thing for a profession that has never required a license to practice.

This syllabus presents ideas, materials, case studies and readings that speak to this moment of change.

Course objectives

* Learn the core ethical principles that have defined the very best journalism.
* Know the chief ethical challenges and salient failures journalism has seen in the past.
* Develop a sharp awareness of how digital technology and increased two-way engagement with audiences are changing the nature of journalistic ethical decision-making and challenging it in new ways.
* Create a language for ethical reasoning and the capacity to apply important principles to concrete reporting situations of all kinds, both old and new.
* Learn the newsgathering rights afforded to journalists as well as the laws that both protect and constrain journalistic practice.

Course design

This course will acquaint students with important ethical principles and professional norms that they can employ in the practice of reporting. Students will develop their knowledge of theories and frameworks, gain knowledge of important journalistic failures and mistakes, as well as emerging areas of professional challenge, and learn how to apply this knowledge during reporting, publication and audience engagement processes. The course is designed to build toward a final project in which students demonstrate a thorough grasp of ethics issues in journalism.

Course materials

Suggested class materials include general texts that supply a theoretical framework, book chapters, and print or online readings that apply to class topics, and films. Instructors can guide students to relevant articles or ask students to do their own research. Readings can be selected from those suggested based on the emphasis of the course designed. Separately, several books are proposed for the instructor’s use and selected chapters may lend themselves to student use as well.

Readings

Suggested chapters from many of the following books are listed with the relevant class.

* Kelly McBride, Tom Rosenstiel, *The New Ethics of Journalism*, 2014.
* Thomas E. Patterson, *Informing the News: The Need for Knowledge-based Journalism*, 2013.
* Sue Ellen Christian, *Overcoming Bias: A Journalist’s Guide to Culture and Context*, 2011.
* Alex S. Jones, *Losing the News: The Future of the News That Feeds Democracy,* 2009.
* Patrick Lee Plaisance, *Media Ethics: Key Principles for Responsible Practice*, 2009.
* Dale Jacquette, *Journalistic Ethics: Moral Responsibility in the Media*, 2007.
* David Craig, [*The Ethics of the Story: Using Narrative Techniques Responsibly in Journalism*](http://books.google.com/books?id=JYPkRuVmQ0AC&printsec=frontcover&dq=the+ethics+of+the+story&source=bl&ots=yC_QR3yC2k&sig=sxgHmzQviaCaDxfqE1hEepFkw0g&hl=en&ei=5C1-TdCNOIr1rAHZ8t3CBQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=6&sqi=2&ved=0CEIQ6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q&f=false), 2006.
* Seth Mnookin, *Hard News: The Scandals at The New York Times and their Meaning for American Media*, 2004.
* Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, 1990.

Online resources

* [Society of Professional Journalists](http://www.spj.org/ethics.asp) & [SPJ Ethics Committee](http://blogs.spjnetwork.org/ethics/)
* [Digital Media Law Project Legal Guide,](http://www.dmlp.org/legal-guide) Harvard University
* [The Poynter Institute](http://www.poynter.org/tag/ethics/)
* [Columbia Journalism Review](http://www.spj.org/ethics-papers.asp)
* [Digital Journalist’s Legal Guide](http://www.rcfp.org/browse-media-law-resources/digital-journalists-legal-guide), Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press
* Nieman Reports, Harvard University
* [Markkula Center for Applied Ethics](http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/focusareas/media/), Santa Clara University
* [Center for Journalism Ethics](https://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/), University of Wisconsin-Madison
* [Knight Case Studies Initiative](https://casestudies.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/case/?search=filter&category=Journalism%20Cases), Columbia University
* [Ethics Cases Online](http://journalism.indiana.edu/resources/ethics/), Indiana University School of Journalism
* [NPR Ombudsman](http://www.npr.org/sections/ombudsman/) & [*New York Times* Public Editor](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/opinion/thepubliceditor/index.html)

Films

* “Spotlight,” 2015 (Open Road Films)
* “Citizenfour,” 2014 (Praxis Films et al.)
* “Kill the Messenger,” 2014 (Bluegrass Films et al.)
* “Frost/Nixon,” 2008 (Universal Pictures et al.)
* “Page One,” 2011 (Participant Media et al.)
* “Good Night and Good Luck,” 2005 (Warner Bros. et al)
* “Shattered Glass,” 2003 (Lions Gate et al.)
* “Broadcast News,” 1987 (Amercent Films et al.)
* “The Killing Fields,” 1984 (Goldcrest Films et al)
* “Absence of Malice,” 1981 (Columbia Pictures)
* “All the President’s Men,” 1976 (Warner Bros. et al)
* “Ace in the Hole,” 1951 (Paramount Pictures et al.)

# Week 1: Foundations: The ethics of truth

### The search for truth and ethics are inextricably bound up in journalism; indeed, the fair, unbiased, uncorrupted and dogged pursuit of accurate information is the essence of ethical reporting. All professional journalism, whether analog or digital, has at its core an aspiration toward accuracy, precision in communication and fairness. This week takes a big-picture look at the pursuit of truth and facts, and reviews some cases where journalists came up short and the consequences in terms of doing a disservice to the public.

### Class 1: Fidelity to truth and the public

Readings

* Roy Peter Clark, “Kicking the Stone: The Search for Reliable Evidence in Journalism,” Chapter 2, *The New Ethics of Journalism*.
* Dale Jacquette, “Truth Telling in the Public Interest,” Chapter 1, *Journalistic Ethics*.
* Thomas E. Patterson, “The Information Problem,” Chapter 1, *Informing the News*.
* [Code of Ethics](http://journalistsresource.org/tip-sheets/foundations/code-of-ethics) of the Society of Professional Journalists.
* NPR [Ethics Handbook](http://ethics.npr.org/).

### Class 2: Truth, falsehood and consequences

Readings

* Robert Mackey, [“U.S. Media Mocked Abroad for Reporting False Name of California Shooting Suspect,”](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/04/world/europe/us-media-mocked-abroad-for-reporting-false-name-of-california-shooting-suspect.html) *New York Times*, Dec. 2015.
* Jordan Burchette, [“Fox News Apologies for Misreported Baltimore Police Shooting: ‘We Screwed Up,’”](https://www.thewrap.com/fox-news-apologizes-for-misreported-baltimore-police-shooting-we-screwed-up/) The Wrap, May 2015.
* Brian Montopoli, [“Distorted Story Spawns Distorted Theories,”](http://www.cjr.org/politics/distorted_story_spawns_distort.php) *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 2005.
* [“Misinformation and Fact-checking: Research findings from Social Science,”](file:///C%3A%5CMisinformation%20and%20fact-checking%5C%20Research%20findings%20from%20social%20science%20-%20See%20more%20at%5C%20http%5C%3A%3Ajournalistsresource.org%3Astudies%3Asociety%3Anews-media%3Amisinformation-fact-checking-research-findings-social-science#sthash.z6T8QC9h.dpuf) Journalist’s Resource, 2012.
* Brendan Nyhan, [“Why the ‘Death Panel’ Myth Wouldn’t Die: Misinformation in the Health Care Re­form Debate,”](http://journalistsresource.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Why-Death-Panel-Myth-Wont-Die.pdf) *The Forum*, 2010.

Assignment

Students should familiarize themselves with the recent troubling ethical case of journalists entering an apartment – with the apparent help of a willing landlord – still under investigation in its connection to the 2015 San Bernadino, Calif., mass shooting. (See [“Landlord Lets Reporters into San Bernadino Suspects’ Home,”](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/05/us/landlord-lets-reporters-into-san-bernardino-suspects-apartment.html) *New York Times*, Dec. 2015.) Write a blog post of 750 words discussing how this case puts the pursuit of truth and professional ethics directly in tension, and make a case for how journalists should conduct themselves in such a situation.

# Week 2: The language and structure of ethical reasoning

This week asks students to step back and to look at the wider world of ethical reasoning and its basis in philosophy, giving students a sophisticated language with which to approach problems in practice. From utilitarianism and a rights-based approach to the common good and virtue approaches, ethics is a field that has some well-established frameworks for application, interpretation and choices of action.

### Class 1: Philosophy and ethical thinking

Readings

* [“A Framework for Thinking Ethically”](http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/framework.html) and [“Ethical Decision Making,”](http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/) Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, Santa Clara University.
* [“Ethics in a Nutshell,”](https://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/resources/ethics-in-a-nutshell/#theoretical) Center for Journalism Ethics, University of Wisconsin.
* Dale Jacquette, “Moral Ideals and Workaday Journalistic Realities,” Chapter 3, *Journalistic Ethics*.
* Carlin Romano, [“We Need ‘Philosophy of Journalism,’”](http://chronicle.com/article/We-Need-Philosophy-of/49119) *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2009.
* Laura Nash, [“Ethics without the Sermon,”](https://hbr.org/1981/11/ethics-without-the-sermon) *Harvard Business Review*, 1981.

### Class 2: Digital ethics

Readings

* Stephen J.A. Ward, [“Digital Media Ethics,”](https://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/resources/digital-media-ethics/) Center for Journalism Ethics, University of Wisconsin.
* Clay Shirky, “Truth without Scarcity, Ethics without Force,” Chapter 1, *The New Ethics of Journalism*.
* Tom Huang, “Storytelling in the Digital Age,” Chapter 3, *The New Ethics of Journalism*.
* Patrick Plaisance, [“Digital Journalism Ethics: Mind the Gap”](http://www.scu.edu/ethics-center/digital-journalism-ethics/databases.cfm) (video), Markkula Center for Applied Ethics.

Assignment

Break the class into teams and ask them to review some of the ethics codes from various media organizations and groups. (Choose from a [list of many different codes](https://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/resources/) provided by the University of Wisconsin’s Center for Journalism Ethics.) What are chief points of similarity and contrast, both substantively and in terms of emphasis? Teams should present their findings and provide an argument for the key points of any ethical code in journalism.

# Week 3: Canonical ethics cases in journalism

### This week familiarizes students with some of the most high-profile scandals and controversial stories involving unethical or questionable journalistic practice, including the cases of Janet Cooke, Jayson Blair, Stephen Glass, Dan Rather and Mike Daisey.

### Class 1: Cases of misconduct

Readings

* Sheila Cornel, Steve Coll, Derek Kravitz, [“*Rolling Stone* and UVA: The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism Report,”](http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/a-rape-on-campus-what-went-wrong-20150405) April 2015.
* Janet Cooke, [“Jimmy’s World”](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/09/28/jimmys-world/605f237a-7330-4a69-8433-b6da4c519120/) (fabrication, retracted), *Washington Post*, 1980; Richard Prince, [“Janet Cooke’s Hoax Still Resonates After 30 Years,”](http://www.theroot.com/blogs/journalisms/2010/10/janet_cookes_hoax_still_resonates_after_30_years.html) The Root, Oct. 2010.
* Hanna Rosin, [“Hello, My Name is Stephen Glass, and I’m Sorry,”](https://newrepublic.com/article/120145/stephen-glass-new-republic-scandal-still-haunts-his-law-career) *The New Republic*, Nov. 2014.
* Ken Auletta, [“Sign-Off: The Long and Complicated Career of Dan Rather,”](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/03/07/sign-off) *The New Yorker,* March 2005.
* Dan Tracy, et al, [“*Sentinel* Finishes Report about Oxycontin Article,”](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2004-02-22/news/0402210060_1_prescribed-oxycontin-sentinel-pain-medication) *Orlando Sentinel*, Feb. 2004.
* Dan Barry, et al, [“*Times* Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception,”](http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/11/us/correcting-the-record-times-reporter-who-resigned-leaves-long-trail-of-deception.html) *New York Times*, May 2003.

### Class 2: Newer cases, new issues

Readings/audio

* [“Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory”](http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/454/mr-daisey-and-the-apple-factory) (audio episode, retracted), This American Life, Jan. 2012; [“Retraction”](http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/460/retraction) (audio episode), This American Life, Mar. 2012.
* Charles Seife, [“Jonah Lehrer’s Journalistic Misdeeds at Wired.com,”](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2012/08/jonah_lehrer_plagiarism_in_wired_com_an_investigation_into_plagiarism_quotes_and_factual_inaccuracies_.single.html) Slate, Aug. 2012.
* David Uberti, [“Journalism Has a Plagiarism Problem, But It’s Not the One You’d Expect,”](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2012/08/jonah_lehrer_plagiarism_in_wired_com_an_investigation_into_plagiarism_quotes_and_factual_inaccuracies_.single.html) *Columbia Journalism Review*, Nov. 2014.

Assignment

Using the free software application [TimelineJS](https://timeline.knightlab.com/), teams of students should construct a chronological sequence of instances of ethical lapses in American journalism over the past decade. While high-profile cases might be surfaced, students should also look for less-publicized cases at smaller news outlets; they should also look to create a theme around an issue such as fabrication, plagiarism, faulty sourcing, etc.

# Week 4: Seeking truth

### This week looks at the need for the journalist to report the truth as fully as possible; to be fair to subjects; and to both hold power accountable and to give voice to those without power. Issues such as the overreliance on single, partisan sources, as well as the distorting lens of racial bias, are introduced.

### Class 1: The challenges of truth

Readings/viewings

* Alex S. Jones, “The Iron Core,” “Objectivity’s Last Stand” and “Media Ethics: The Painful Balance,” Chapters 1,4-5, *Losing the News*.
* [“Accuracy,”](http://ethics.npr.org/category/a1-accuracy/) NPR Ethics Handbook.
* Dale Jacquette, “Objectivity, Perspective and Bias,” Chapter 8, *Journalistic Ethics*.
* Steve Katz, [“Getting the Facts Straight”](http://www.scu.edu/ethics-center/digital-journalism-ethics/databases.cfm) (video), Markkula Center for Applied Ethics.
* [“Reporting an Explosive Truth: The *Boston Globe* and Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church,”](http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/caseconsortium/casestudies/14/casestudy/www/layout/case_id_14.html) Knight Case Studies Initiative, Columbia University.

### Class 2: Spin, sources and bias

Readings

* Thomas E. Patterson, “The Source Problem,” Chapter 2, *Informing the News.*
* Margaret Sullivan, [“The Disconnect on Anonymous Sources,”](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/opinion/sunday/the-public-editor-the-disconnect-on-anonymous-sources.html) *New York Times*, Oct. 2013.
* Franklin Foer, [“The Source of the Trouble,”](http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/media/features/9226/) *New York Magazine*, May 2005.
* [“Racial bias and news media reporting: New research trends,”](http://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/news-media/racial-bias-reporting-research-trends) Journalist’s Resource, 2015.
* Eric Deggans, [“Why ethics and diversity matter: The case of Trayvon Martin coverage,”](http://www.poynter.org/2012/mostly-white-and-sometimes-brown-media-people-in-a-mostly-brown-and-sometimes-white-world/192604/) Poynter, Oct. 2012.
* Tony Biascotti, [“*San Francisco Chronicle* suspends reporter for press release copy-and-paste,”](http://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/san_francisco_chronicle_suspends_reporter.php) *Columbia Journalism Review*, Oct. 2015.
* David Barstow, Robin Stein, [“Under Bush, a New Age of Prepackaged TV News,”](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/13/politics/under-bush-a-new-age-of-prepackaged-tv-news.html) *New York Times*, March 2005.

Assignment

Students should choose a news story that they believe does not reflect the whole truth. Write a blog post dissecting the structure of the reporting, the sources and data cited (or not cited), and exploring the ways in which the story might be improved. Alternatively, students might be assigned to the same story and could exchange comments beneath one another’s blog posts as part of an online dialogue about the story in question.

# Week 5: Being transparent

This week takes a closer look at how journalists must “show their work” in a digital age and demonstrate intellectual honesty to the public. Above all, any conflicts of interest, and the appearance of conflicts of interest, must be avoided.

### Class 1: Being clear about methods

Readings

* “Part Two: Transparency,” pp. 89-165, Chapters 6-10, *The New Ethics of Journalism*.
* Charles Ornstein and Annie Waldman, [“How We Analyzed Privacy Violation Data,”](https://www.propublica.org/article/methodology-how-we-analyzed-privacy-violation-data) ProPublica, Dec. 2015.
* T. Christian Miller, [“How We Reported ‘An Unbelievable Story of Rape,’”](https://www.propublica.org/article/how-we-reported-an-unbelievable-story-of-rape) ProPublica, Dec. 2015.

### Class 2: Intellectual honesty

Readings

* Margaret Sullivan, [“Perfectly Reasonable Question: Quoting a Person or a Prepared Statement?”](http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/04/perfectly-reasonable-question-quoting-a-person-or-a-prepared-statement/#more-8543); [“Conflict of Interest in *T Magazine*’s Tech Article,”](http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/10/29/conflict-of-interest-in-t-magazines-tech-article/) *New York Times*, Aug./Oct. 2015.
* Ira Basen, [“Why Transparency Is Not Enough: The Case of Mr. Mike,”](https://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/2011/06/21/why-transparency-is-not-enough-the-case-of-mr-mike/) Center for Journalism Ethics, University of Wisconsin, June 2011.
* [“Potential Conflicts of Interest,”](http://journalism.nyu.edu/publishing/ethics-handbook/potential-conflicts-of-interest/) NYU Journalism Handbook for Students.
* [“Conflicted: The *New York Times* and the Bias Question,”](https://casestudies.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/case/Conflicted/) Knight Case Studies Initiative, Columbia University.
* Michael Hiltzik, [“Are Silicon Valley Tech Bloggers Truly Objective?”](http://articles.latimes.com/2012/feb/22/business/la-fi-hiltzik-20120222) *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 2012.
* Jemima Kiss, [“Does the AOL ‘Crunchgate’ Spat Mark the End for Techcrunch?”](http://www.theguardian.com/media/pda/2011/sep/07/techcrunch-mike-arrington-aol) *The Guardian*, Sept. 2011.

Assignment

Students should analyze a media organization and the company that owns it. They should focus on whether there is a stated ethics and conflict of interest policy on the website, and do further research on the background of executives, managers and principals, and perform public records searches, to the extent possible. For publicly traded companies, review the [Journalist’s Resource tip sheet](http://journalistsresource.org/tip-sheets/research/understanding-financial-statements) on reading financial statements. Students might also pull the 990 IRS disclosure forms of several non-profit journalism outlets (databases can be found in several places listed [here at Journalist’s Resource](http://journalistsresource.org/tip-sheets/reporting/investigating-nonprofits-and-charities-where-to-find-internal-data-and-public-records).) They should analyze those disclosure forms and compare them with funding disclosures listed at the news outlets’ websites. In particular, students should look at Section VII, where board members, directors and trustees are listed, and do research to figure out the affiliations of persons listed. Write a blog post about the quality of disclosure and the ways any conflicts of interest may be problematic as it relates to reporting on certain issues.

# Week 6: Engaging community; minimizing harm and respecting privacy

### This week’s class focuses on the journalist’s relationship with an increasingly wired public. It explores the dual imperatives to facilitate the capacity of the community to communicate and engage on issues, and to minimize the harm to community members when journalism must tell tough and revealing stories in an online environment. Readings also touch on communicating controversial or sensitive issues.

### Class 1: Engagement and discretion

Readings

* “Part Three: Community,” pp. 165-216, Chapters 11-14, *The New Ethics of Journalism*.
* Joseph Lichterman, [“How Renée Kaplan, the FT’s first head of audience engagement, approaches her new role,”](http://www.niemanlab.org/2015/06/qa-how-renee-kaplan-the-fts-first-head-of-audience-engagement-approaches-her-new-role/) Nieman Journalism Lab, June 2015.
* [“Crowdsourcing at the Fort Myers, FL, News-Press Part B: ‘Help Us Investigate,’”](http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/caseconsortium/casestudies/20/casestudy/www/layout/case_id_20_id_227.html) Knight Case Studies Initiative, Columbia University.
* Anne Johnson, [“Policing The Trolls: The Ins and Outs of Comment Moderation,”](http://www.npr.org/sections/ombudsman/2014/09/24/348775874/policing-the-trolls-the-ins-and-outs-of-comment-moderation) NPR.org, Sept. 2015.
* Molly De Aguiar, [“Building News with Not Just For the Community,”](http://www.niemanlab.org/2015/12/building-news-with-not-just-for-the-community/) Nieman Journalism Lab, Dec. 2015.
* Helen Lewis, [“How Newsrooms Handle Graphic Images of Violence,”](http://niemanreports.org/articles/how-newsrooms-handle-graphic-images-of-violence/) Nieman Reports, Jan. 2016.
* Edward Schumacher-Matos, [“Changing Field: A New Guideline On What To Call That Washington Football Team,”](http://www.npr.org/sections/ombudsman/2014/10/14/356123483/changing-field-a-new-guideline-on-what-to-call-that-washington-football-team) NPR.org, Oct. 2014.
* [“Digital Deadline: The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and the Kirkwood Shooting,”](http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/caseconsortium/casestudies/29/casestudy/www/layout/case_id_29.html) Knight Case Studies Initiative, Columbia University.

### Class 2: Privacy and confidential sources

Readings

* Dale Jacquette, “Protection of Confidential Sources” and “Journalistic Respect for Privacy,” Chapters 6-7, *Journalistic Ethics*.
* [“Protecting Sources and Source Material,”](http://www.dmlp.org/legal-guide/protecting-sources-and-source-material) Digital Media Law Project, Harvard University.
* Al Tompkins, [“Where The Journal News went wrong in publishing names, addresses of gun owners,”](http://www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/199218/where-the-journal-news-went-wrong-in-publishing-names-addresses-of-gun-owners/) Poynter Institute, Jan. 2013.
* Nicholas Kristoff, [“Is It Ever O.K. to Name Rape Victims?”](http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/02/04/is-it-ever-ok-to-name-rape-victims/) *New York Times*, Feb. 2010.
* Rui Kaneya, [“Reporter faces jail time for scoop in gruesome murder case,”](http://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/patch_reporter_faces_jail_time_for_scoop_in_illinois_murder_case.php) *Columbia Journalism Review*, Aug. 2014.
* [“Privacy and the Public Interest: Frederick, MD, *News-Post* and the Bruce Ivins Story,”](http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/caseconsortium/casestudies/27/casestudy/www/layout/case_id_27.html) Knight Case Studies Initiative, Columbia University.

Assignment

Review the *Dallas Morning News* series [“Yolanda’s Crossing”](http://www.dallasnews.com/news/local-news/20111025-yolanda-s-crossing.ece) and review the related presentation by Tom Huang for the Poynter Institute, [“Credibility and Journalism in the Digital Age.”](http://www.newsu.org/course_files/2014IndiaTourPDFs/TomHuangCredibilityandJournalismintheDigitalAge.pdf) Write a blog post of 750-1,000 words addressing a few key questions: Why should this story be told? What are some challenges to journalistic independence in reporting a project like this? Who could be harmed by the reporting?

# Week 7: Coverage perils: Sensationalism and speed

### This week will take up some concrete cases that highlight two perils inherent in the nature of the news business: The twin desires to grab attention and to be first with the story. We will look at issues of proportionality and discretion, and focus on the careful balance between informing the public and sensationalizing an issue for the purposes of web traffic, ratings or other motives. The dynamics of breaking news, especially when fueled by social media, will be explored.

### Class 1: Proportionality and judgment in coverage

Readings

* [“Cover Worthy” and “Horror on Record,”](http://www.newseum.org/2015/08/26/case-study-when-should-we-look-away/) Case studies from the Newseum, Aug. 2015.
* Mark Follman, [“How the Media Inspires Mass Shooters,”](http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/10/media-inspires-mass-shooters-copycats) *Mother Jones*, Oct. 2015.
* [“Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals,”](http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/resource_media.pdf) World Health Organization, 2008.

**Class 2: Live coverage and potential for error**

Readings

* Edward Schumacher-Matos, [“Getting It Right: Sandy Hook And The Giffords Legacy At NPR,”](http://www.npr.org/sections/ombudsman/2012/12/21/167828109/getting-it-right-sandy-hook-and-the-giffords-legacy-at-npr) NPR.org, Jan. 2013.
* Brian Stetler, [“News Media and Social Media Become Part of a Real-Time Manhunt Drama,”](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/20/us/media-becomes-part-of-story-in-boston-manhunt.html) *New York Times*, April 2013.
* Jack Shafer, [“In Defense of Journalistic Error,”](http://blogs.reuters.com/jackshafer/2013/04/22/in-defense-of-journalistic-error/) Reuters, April 2013.
* Bill Grueskin, [“In Defense of Scoops,”](http://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/in_defense_of_scoops.php?page=all) *Columbia Journalism Review*, April 2013.

Assignment

Students should use news archives and social media archive tools to review breaking news coverage around national or international events such as the Boston Marathon Bombing or the San Bernadino, Calif., mass shooting. Write a blog post of 750-1,000 words with observations about how storylines develop, errors are made and news outlets iterate and evolve in their coverage. To limit the scope of analysis, students might choose to focus on just one or two sources.

# Week 8: Knowing the evolving laws: From defamation to fair use

### This week will focus on core American case law relating to the press and new laws and norms relating to the use of digital technology to record, document and tell news stories. The focus of inquiry will range from landmark legal cases to new norms relating to the digital world.

### Class 1: The core of the law

Readings

* Majority and dissenting opinions in landmark First Amendment Supreme Court cases: *Near v. Minnesota* (1931)*; Times v. Sullivan* (1964)*; Branzburg v. Hayes* (1971)*; New York Times v. United States* (1971).
* Marc Gunther, [“The Lion’s Share,”](http://ajrarchive.org/Article.asp?id=349) *American Journalism Review*, March 1997.
* [“Publishing Information that Harms Another's Reputation,”](http://www.dmlp.org/legal-guide/publishing-information-harms-anothers-reputation) Digital Media Law Project, Harvard University.
* Jonathan Peters, [“A pair of lawsuits highlight libel law’s complexity,”](http://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/nytimes_city_paper_libel_suits.php) *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 2015.
* [*The First Amendment Handbook*](http://www.rcfp.org/first-amendment-handbook), Reporter’s Committee for Freedom of the Press.

**Class 2: Digital and online issues**

Readings

* [“Live-blogging and Tweeting from Court”](http://www.dmlp.org/legal-guide/live-blogging-and-tweeting-from-court); [“Publishing Information that Harms Another's Reputation”](http://www.dmlp.org/legal-guide/publishing-information-harms-anothers-reputation); [“Practical Tips for Handling Requests to Correct or Remove Material,”](http://www.dmlp.org/legal-guide/practical-tips-handling-requests-correct-or-remove-material) Digital Media Law Project, Harvard University.
* Laruen Kirchner, [“Bloggers versus the courts: An online writing defamation roundup,”](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/sued_bloggers_state-level_free.php) *Columbia Journalism Review*, Jan. 2014.
* Jonathan Peters, [“Can I Use That? A Legal Primer for Journalists,”](http://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/journalist_legal_questions.php) *Columbia Journalism Review*, Oct. 2015.

Assignment

Students should review the [“Legal Threat” Database](http://www.dmlp.org/database) at Harvard’s Digital Media Law Project. Choose a case or set of cases that highlight certain live legal issues that journalists may confront. Write a blog post of 750-1,000 words on the implications for journalists and what they should know about the law in this area.

# Week 9: Newsgathering and the rights (and responsibilities) of journalists

### What does “on background” really mean? Should you friend someone on Facebook in order to get information about them as a source? Should you fly a drone over his or her home? This week will drill down on such questions, and on specific “field” practices and tools relating to news gathering. The class will explore ethical dilemmas relating to how information can be obtained, verified and published with discretion and professionalism.

### Class 1: Rights of reporters

Readings

* Dale Jacquette, “Journalistic Rights and Responsibilities,” Chapter 2, *Journalistic Ethics*.
* Jonathan Peters, [“Can I Do That? A Legal Primer for Journalists,”](http://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/can_i_do_that_a_legal_primer_for_journalists.php) *Columbia Journalism Review*, Oct. 2015.
* [“Newsgathering and Privacy”](http://www.dmlp.org/legal-guide/newsgathering-and-privacy); [“Recording Phone Calls, Conversations, Meetings and Hearings”](http://www.dmlp.org/legal-guide/recording-phone-calls-conversations-meetings-and-hearings); [“Recording Police Officers and Public Officials,”](http://www.dmlp.org/legal-guide/recording-police-officers-and-public-officials) Digital Media Law Project, Harvard University.

**Class 2: Responsibilities in newsgathering**

Readings

* [“Interviewing a Source: Rules of the Road; Talking with Officials and Experts,”](http://journalistsresource.org/tip-sheets/reporting/interviewing-a-source) Journalist’s Resource, Jan. 2013.
* Helen Lewis, [“When Is It Ethical to Publish Stolen Data?”](http://niemanreports.org/articles/when-is-it-ethical-to-publish-stolen-data/) Nieman Reports, June 2015.
* [“The Facebook Conundrum: The New Haven *Independent* and the Annie Le Murder,”](http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/caseconsortium/casestudies/53/casestudy/www/layout/case_id_53.html) Knight Case Studies Initiative, Columbia University.
* Kelly McBride, [“BuzzFeed reporter’s use of tweets stirs controversy,”](http://www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/243413/buzzfeed-reporters-use-of-tweets-stirs-controversy/) Poynter Institute, Nov. 2014.

Assignment

Students should seek to understand the rules and regulations that govern press access and rights on their college campus. Review [“Examining a journalist’s right of access to college and university campuses,”](http://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/examining_a_journalists_right_of_access_to_college_and_university_campuses.php) (Jonathan Peters, *Columbia Journalism Review*, Dec. 2015) for an introduction to the topic. Interview relevant stakeholders (public relations persons, town or city reporters, campus news reporters) and write a blog post on the “state of the free press” on campus.

# Week 10: Journalists and social media

### This week will examine evolving norms and rules for how journalists should conduct themselves in “public” digital spaces and how best to engage communities and maintain credibility.

### Class 1: Personal and professional behavior

Readings

* [“Social Media,”](http://ethics.npr.org/tag/social-media/) NPR Ethics Handbook.
* [“Social Media Guidelines for AP Reporters,”](http://www.ap.org/Images/Social-Media-Guidelines_tcm28-9832.pdf) Associated Press.
* [“What Audiences Think of Journalists’ Social Media Use,”](http://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/news-media/audience-perception-journalists-use-social-media) Journalist’s Resource, 2015.
* Jackie Spinner, [“On the ‘digital frontline,’ social media reporters and editors exposed to vicarious trauma,”](http://www.cjr.org/first_person/social_media_reporters_and_vicarious_trauma.php) *Columbia Journalism Review*, Dec. 2015.

**Class 2: Verification and wider dynamics**

Readings/video

* Mark Little, [“What Social Verification Teaches about Trust”](http://www.scu.edu/ethics-center/digital-journalism-ethics/vetting.cfm) (video), Markkula Center for Applied Ethics.
* Josh Stearns, [“How Verification Became a Community Service in Social Journalism,”](http://mediashift.org/idealab/2015/11/how-verification-became-a-community-service-in-social-journalism/) Media Shift Idea Lab, Nov. 2015.
* [“Social and news media, violent extremism, ISIS and online speech: Research review,”](http://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/social-media/social-media-violent-extremism-isis-online-speech-research-review) Journalist’s Resource, March 2015.

Assignment

Students should review the American Press Institute’s [collection of news articles](http://www.americanpressinstitute.org/topics/community-engagement/) on community engagement strategies. Write a blog post synthesizing best practices based on a group of related articles, and send out multiple tweets or social media posts based on the blog post. Classmates should respond to one another on social media platforms as part of the exercise.

# Week 11: Native advertising, institutional firewalls and fluid norms

### This week’s materials and discussion will focus on how the evolving business model in journalism is challenging the profession’s ethical core in important ways, some of which are not always obvious.

### Class 1: Church and state separation

Readings

* Ira Basen, [“Breaking Down the Wall,”](https://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/2012/12/19/breaking-down-the-wall/) Center for Journalism Ethics, University of Wisconsin, Dec. 2012.
* Dean Starkman, [“Bloomberg News and the problem of church-state separation,”](http://www.cjr.org/the_audit/bloomberg_news_and_the_problem.php) *Columbia Journalism Review*, Nov. 2013.
* [“A Matter of Opinion: The *Oregonian* Editorial Board and Sam Adams,”](http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/caseconsortium/casestudies/37/casestudy/www/layout/case_id_37.html) Knight Case Studies Initiative, Columbia University.

**Class 2: Advertising, funders and influence**

Readings

* Margaret Sullivan, [“As Print Fades, Part 1: ‘Live Journalism’ at The *Times*”](http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/10/as-print-fades-part-1-live-journalism-at-the-times/#more-8550); [“As Print Fades, Part 3: Sponsorships and Start-ups,”](http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/09/28/as-print-fades-part-3-sponsorships-and-start-ups/#more-8798) *New York Times*, Aug./Sept. 2015.
* [“Native advertising and sponsored content: Research on audience, ethics, effectiveness,”](http://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/news-media/native-advertising-sponsored-content-audience-ethics-effectiveness) Journalist’s Resource, Aug. 2015.
* *The Atlantic*: [“Advertising Guidelines.”](https://cdn.theatlantic.com/static/front/docs/ads/TheAtlanticAdvertisingGuidelines.pdf)
* Jared Keller, [“*The Atlantic*, the Church of Scientology, and the Perils of Native Advertising,”](http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2013-01-15/the-atlantic-the-church-of-scientology-and-the-perils-of-native-advertising) Bloomberg Business, Jan. 2013.
* [“Can Investigative Journalism Pay?: InvestigateWest and the Nonprofit Model,”](http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/caseconsortium/casestudies/111/casestudy/www/layout/case_id_111.html) Knight Case Studies Initiative, Columbia University.

Assignment

Students should work in teams to devise a 3-4 page ideal ethics policy relating to advertising and funders, both as it relates to a given news institution, its structure and individual news teams and reporters. They should post these online and comment on strength and weakness of one another’s proposed policies.

# Week 12: Perils of data and video

### This week will focus on the two key areas of growth within media as news becomes digital-first – data graphics and video – and explores how these specific mediums can misinform if not deployed carefully and thoughtfully.

### Class 1: Data perils

Readings

* Alberto Cairo, [“Data Journalism Needs to Up Its Own Standards,”](http://www.niemanlab.org/2014/07/alberto-cairo-data-journalism-needs-to-up-its-own-standards/) Nieman Journalism Lab, July 2014.
* [“Data Journalism Ethics: Tricky Questions Buried in the Numbers,”](http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/focusareas/media/data-journalism/) Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, Santa Clara University.
* Margaret Sullivan, [“*Times Magazine* Editor on ‘Creative Apocalypse’ Article,”](http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/09/05/times-magazine-editor-on-creative-apocalypse-article/#more-8676) *New York Times*, Sept. 2015.
* Seth C. Lewis, et al. [“Big Data and Journalism: Epistemology, Expertise, Economics and Ethics,”](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21670811.2014.976418) *Digital Journalism*, 2015.

**Class 2: Video norms and accuracy**

Readings

* WGBH, [“*Frontline* Journalistic Guidelines,”](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/about-us/journalistic-guidelines/) 2015.
* Liam Andrew, [“Controlled chaos: As journalism and documentary film converge in digital, what lessons can they share?”](http://www.niemanlab.org/2014/10/controlled-chaos-as-journalism-and-documentary-film-converge-in-digital-what-lessons-can-they-share/) Nieman Journalism Lab, Oct. 2014.
* [“Best practices for documentary filmmakers and journalistic video work: Research on risks, resources,”](http://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/news-media/best-practices-documentary-filmmakers-journalistic-video-work) Journalist’s Resource, April 2015.
* [“*Frontline*'s "The Last Abortion Clinic": What's Fair in a Video World?”](https://casestudies.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/case/Frontline/) Knight Case Studies Initiative, Columbia University.

Assignment

Students should review the data journalism case detailed in [“Times Was Right to Change Insensitive Graphic”](http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/09/11/iran-deal-graphic-jewish-lawmakers-was-insensitive/) (Margaret Sullivan, *New York Times*, Sept. 2015.) They should then locate other graphics published by news organizations that conceivably could offend or upset communities of various kinds. Write a blog post of 750-1,000 words dissecting several questionable instances and propose solutions for each case that balance the pursuit of truth with data and a sense of discretion and fairness.

# Week 13: Truth in an era of big leaks, globalization and polarization

### This week takes a broad final look at the societal patterns and trends within journalism that will challenge journalistic norms and the profession’s ethical code in the coming decades.

### Class 1: A post-Snowden media world

Readings

* Sean Wilentz, [“Would You Feel Differently About Snowden, Greenwald, and Assange If You Knew What They Really Thought?”](https://newrepublic.com/article/116253/edward-snowden-glenn-greenwald-julian-assange-what-they-believe) *The New Republic*, Jan. 2014.
* [“Covert Activity: the *Washington Post*, Edward Snowden and the National Security Agency,”](http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/caseconsortium/casestudies/147/casestudy/www/layout/case_id_147.html) Knight Case Studies Initiative, Columbia University.
* Jenna McLaughlin, [“Laura Poitras Sues U.S. Government to Find Out Why She Was Repeatedly Stopped at the Border,”](https://theintercept.com/2015/07/13/laura-poitras-sues-u-s-government-find-repeatedly-stopped-border/) The Intercept, July 2015.
* Bill Buzenberg, [“Anatomy of a Global Investigation: Collaborative, Data-driven, Without Borders,”](http://shorensteincenter.org/anatomy-of-a-global-investigation-william-buzenberg/#Introduction) Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School, July 2015.

**Class 2: Polarization and misinformation**

Readings

* Steve Myers, “Fact-Checking 2.0,” Chapter 4, *The New Ethics of Journalism*.
* Thomas E. Patterson, “The Democracy Problem,” Chapter 6, *Informing the News*.
* [“Research chat: U.T. Austin’s Talia Stroud on how to de-polarize news audiences,”](http://journalistsresource.org/tip-sheets/research/research-chat-talia-stroud-ut-austin-de-polarize-news-audiences) Journalist’s Resource, Oct. 2014.
* [“Media bias, partisanship and what it means for democracy: Research chat and reading list,”](http://journalistsresource.org/tip-sheets/research/media-bias-partisanship-what-it-means-democracy-chat-reading-list) Journalist’s Resource, April 2014.

Assignment

Final project due.

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*A special thanks to John Wihbey, assistant professor at Northeastern University and a consultant to Journalist’s Resource, for help in preparing this syllabus.*