Media Ethics at Work

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True Stories From Young Professionals

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Editors

Contents

SECTION II HONESTY

SECTION III   SENSITIVITY

xvi

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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.[1] 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,"[2] 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."[3]

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

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.

2. V. Whitehouse and J. B. McPherson (2002), "Media Ethics Textbook Case Studies Need New Actors and New Issues," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 17*(3).

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.

CHAPTER 1

Tools for Ethical Decision Making

Lee Anne Peck

"This doesn't seem right," you think. You're the youngest and newest person in the office, but all your instincts tell you that something about the story or the project you've been assigned is not quite, well, ethical. Whom should you talk to? What should you do?

Not to worry. You're not alone. You have colleagues, professional associations and their codes, and centuries of ethical theory to draw upon. Exploring tools now will help you reason through the dilemmas you'll face in the future. Otherwise, you can jump into decision making with only what you're feeling. Learning to think through a dilemma will not only make you more confident and comfortable with your decision; it will also help you justify to others why you acted the way you did.

The Western philosophical theories shared in this chapter include many that students tend to embrace. That doesn't mean you and your instructor or colleagues should not explore others, such as the Judeo-Christian perspective and the Golden Rule, but these will get you started. If you're questioning how theory—especially theory from centuries ago—can help you, stay tuned. Along with each philosopher's ideas in this chapter, you'll find examples of how those ideas might apply to situations that face today's media professionals.

The chapter begins with some basic definitions, followed by a discussion of ethics codes. It continues with the beginnings of Western ethical thought and then moves into concrete theories you might use while reasoning through a dilemma. You'll see that many of the theories embrace similar key concepts, such as justice, fairness, empathy and equality. You may just find yourself using them in your personal life, too. Who knew you were an Aristotelian?

Some of you have taken a philosophy course or two, so this will be a review, but for those who haven't, let's start with the basics. The study of philosophy can be broken into three areas:

1. What is being? (ontology)

2. What is knowing? (epistemology)

3. How should one act? (ethics)

This book, of course, focuses on how one should act—and in particular, how one should act while working in one's chosen profession. Based on the Greek word *ethos*, ethics explores the philosophical foundations of decision making. When you reason through dilemmas, you think about morality, which comes from the Latin word *mores*. Morality refers to the way in which people actually behave or act. Therefore, ethics is an examination of morality.

Ethics, in turn, can be broken into three subareas:

1. **Metaethics** analyzes the meaning of moral language. What do the words you use signify?

2. **Normative ethics** considers the norms that act as principles of ethical behavior.

3. **Applied ethics, or casuistry**, applies normative theories to specific ethical dilemmas.

This book asks you to explore both normative ethics and the principles of your chosen profession. It then encourages you to do applied ethics, as defined above, with the book's cases. Please note that these true stories of young professionals concern media ethics, not media law. Sometimes a society's morality may be transformed into law; a connection can exist, but remember, the two are not the same.

Henry Watterson (1840–1921), longtime editor of the admired *Louisville-Courier Journal*, lamented at the end of the 19th century that journalism had no code of ethics, that its "moral destination" seemed confused. This worried Watterson and other U.S. newspaper editors and publishers. At the beginning

of the 20th century, other media professions—such as advertising, radio broadcasting and press agentry (public relations)—began coming under scrutiny for their "morals." Slowly, all media began creating codes of ethics. Some of those codes are still used today, but updated, of course.

As you learn about your chosen profession, you'll want to read and understand the profession's codes of ethics. Web links for codes from different organizations—from the Society of Professional Journalists to the Public Relations Society of America—are listed in the appendix, and some authors also share links to codes within their chapters. In addition, some media organizations have written their own codes, so you should always ask which code your new employer follows. Also, for transparency's sake, an increasing number of media organizations post their codes online for the public to see.

Media ethics codes are guidelines, not rules or laws. Because media professionals are not licensed the way lawyers and doctors are, they cannot "lose their licenses," so to speak, for violating an ethics code. They can, however, be fired. Getting fired doesn't mean a media professional can never work in the field again, but it does make finding another job difficult. Most important, violating a code of ethics can hurt people and damage the reputation of your entire profession.

Although codes remain a good place to begin your understanding of media ethics, it's important to be able to move beyond codes by using thought and analysis when a dilemma arises. Ethicist Bob Steele, the Poynter Institute's values scholar, says media professionals must go beyond gut feelings and "rule obedience," trusting instead in reflection and reasoning.[1] In other words, you can turn to codes for initial guidance when making an ethical decision, but usually you'll need to go further in your deliberations if your situation is not blatantly black and white. Few ethical dilemmas are clear-cut.

Philosophical Theories

When you're working to resolve an ethical dilemma, don't discount those who came before you—*way* before you. The ethical theories of philosophers such as Aristotle, Immanuel Kant and others can help in your deliberations as can the ideas of contemporary ethics scholars. Sometimes a single theory or professional code will be enough to point you toward a solution; other times you'll need to combine various theories and tools. It depends on the dilemma. The important thing is to start building your resources now before you're facing an ethical question on deadline.

Socrates

We begin with Socrates. He taught Plato, who taught Aristotle. Socrates, the son of a stone mason, lived in Athens from 469–399 BC. He believed in following one's principles and being independent in thought. Because Socrates did not write "lecture notes," Plato wrote many of Socrates' philosophical teachings into dialogues with Socrates as the main character. Socrates believed that he could best help Athenians by asking them to examine their moral lives. He has been quoted as saying, "The unexamined life is not worth living."[2]

Socrates tried to convince Athenians that each of them was responsible for his or her own moral actions and that unethical behavior came from ignorance, or a lack of knowledge. Remember this idea as you read the cases in this book; often the young professionals encountering an ethical dilemma did not have the information they needed in order to make a sound decision. Back in Athens, Socrates believed his calling was to correct this ignorance in citizens.

The government of Athens saw things differently. In 399 BC, it imprisoned Socrates and sentenced him to death for allegedly corrupting Athens' youth with his ideas and introducing false gods. Plato explained Socrates' situation in the dialogue "Crito" in which Socrates' friend Crito tries to persuade Socrates to escape prison. Socrates refuses, explaining his reasons to Crito. In this dialogue, Plato emphasizes Socrates' principles: independence, justification for one's actions and social responsibility—all important principles upon which media professionals should agree.

Socrates explains to his friend that he has been a citizen of Athens all his life, so why would he want to break the law and escape? That would be both disrespectful and unlawful. Socrates asks Crito what kind of message he would be sending to the people of Athens if he escaped from jail. Could he truly teach virtuous behavior somewhere else, somewhere outside of Athens? He would be a hypocrite. He has two sons. What message would he be sending to them?

Socrates believes that if he remains in prison and is executed, he would actually enhance Athens' morality. Socrates uses his own independent reasoning to come to this conclusion, and he justifies his decision, which he believes to be socially responsible. Crito now understands why Socrates will stay in prison; he says nothing else.

Plato was one of the Athenians who learned Socrates' technique for finding the truth, today called the Socratic method. The speaker or teacher asks respondents a series of questions that eventually shows them that they need to do more reasoning and reflection about their beliefs and actions. At your place

of employment or at your university, you may find a "go-to" person whose mind works in ways that complement yours and who is good at asking questions when an ethical dilemma arises.

Plato

After Socrates was put to death, his student Plato (428/7–348/7 BC) became conflicted about Athens' political atmosphere. Plato had wanted a life in politics but decided instead to continue his philosophy studies, so he left Athens. During his 12 years away, he is thought to have spent time in Italy at the colony, or commune, created by the Greek philosopher Pythagoras, and he also spent time at an agricultural community in Egypt. Some scholars believe that Plato incorporated his travels into his work the *Republic* (360 BC), which describes a utopian world where philosophers have positions of power.

After returning to Athens, Plato started the Academy, often considered to be the first university. The subjects studied were the sciences, mathematics, and philosophy, which included Plato's writings with Socrates as the narrator. Plato taught that the virtues of moderation, courage and wisdom combined to create the highest virtue: justice. *Justice* had a broader meaning than it does today; it meant "the good life," with morality as the final "good." In other words, to have a good life was to have a moral life.

Plato's text the *Republic*, specifically the section titled "Allegory of the Cave," can help beginning media professionals understand their position in the world and how to achieve "the good life." After reading the *Republic*, you will come to understand that Plato did not have much faith in humankind to act morally. He thought that if given the chance, and if they could get away with it, many people would act immorally. Plato believed that being ethical comes from using reason, and those who truly had a grasp of reason could be the philosopher king and the guardians in the *Republic*.

In the *Republic*'s short passage the Allegory of the Cave, Plato shows how the masses sometimes do not reason well. Because some believe the passage to be the most influential in Western philosophy, it's important to understand its symbolism.

To summarize, in Plato's cave, men have been chained by their necks and legs to a wall all their lives; they can only look straight ahead. Behind the prisoners, a fire burns, reflecting light above them. Between the fire and the wall is a passageway where "puppeteers" walk, holding artificial objects above their heads. These items make shadows on the wall above the prisoners, and for these prisoners, the shadows become their reality. However, one prisoner

escapes from the cave. He sees the real world outside and returns to the cave to tell the other prisoners the truth—that the shadows they see are not reality. They do not believe him.

As a media professional, you could consider the prisoners to be a society made up of people who believe everything they see or hear—such as rumors blasted through the Internet. Consider the puppeteers to be the information manipulators, controlling what society sees and keeping it entertained. Outside of the cave sits reality, or the truth. The prisoner who escapes is you, the media professional, returning to the cave to educate the other prisoners. In other words, if you become a member of the media, you need to educate society—but, first, you must educate yourself and have the courage to speak the truth.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

Socrates and Plato both had an influence on the philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC). Born in Macedonia, north of Ancient Greece, and the son of the doctor Nicomachus, Aristotle later created a decision-making tool, the Doctrine of the Mean, which can still be useful to us today. In 367 BC, Aristotle moved to Athens and studied at Plato's Academy for 20 years. After Plato died, Aristotle left Athens for several years. He returned in 335 BC and created his own school, the Lyceum; Plato's nephew Speusippus had taken over the Academy after his uncle's death.

Although Aristotle died in his early 60s, he left many writings that read like lecture notes; scholars believe that what exists today is only about one third of his writings. His work differed from Plato's in that Aristotle used no comedy or irony as Plato sometimes did, and he studied diverse topics, which included biology and physics. Aristotle's writings on ethics include *Eudemian Ethics*, edited by his student Eudemus, and *Nicomachean Ethics*, edited by his son Nicomachus and thought to be the work written closest to his death and, therefore, to be the closest to his beliefs.

Aristotle believed that ethical decision making is a skill (a *tekhne*) and that ethical behavior cannot be an exact science; no formula fits every situation. Aristotle didn't give his decision-making tool a name, but many call it the Golden Mean or the Doctrine of the Mean. (The latter seems preferable so as not to be confused with the Golden Rule.)

Although Aristotle believed no specific right action exists for any ethical situation, he did believe you should avoid the extremes. He saw virtue as a middle state between excess and deficiency. For instance, he said the virtue of courage, or being courageous, sits between two extremes—one being foolhardy

and the other being cowardly. Finding the perfect point between these two extremes may be different from person to person or from case to case.

Examples of extremes follow:

Extravagance--Stinginess

Buffoonery--Boorishness

What is the most virtuous action between two extremes? To know what to choose, according to Aristotle, you must be working from the right character, which he said can't come just from reading. What's learned from a book, Aristotle called *intellectual virtues*; for instance, learning your profession's code of ethics by reading the code would be an intellectual virtue.

Aristotle believed you need to learn moral virtue through action, by actually practicing virtuous behavior. Moral virtues must be lived or be habits, he said. To use his Doctrine of the Mean, you must have the correct character. Aristotle would say that his mean can be understood and used by those who have grown up practicing the correct virtuous habits.

Character building should start with your parents and other adults involved in your early years. The people at your church might be included as well as your grade school and secondary school teachers. In college, university professors should be taking on the task. When you graduate and get a job, co-workers and supervisors should be mentors. Character building becomes an ongoing process. Adults should take on that responsibility, Aristotle said, and as you become older, he would ask that you do the same for the next generation.

To practice using his Doctrine of the Mean, let's say you work for a local news organization. The scanner announces a bad single-car accident in which a high school student has died. A photographer/videographer from your newsroom goes to the scene and takes a variety of shots—from gory images of the body to faraway shots showing just crime scene tape with authorities standing around. You and your colleagues need to choose a photo to use for the daily print product and possibly a video to put online.

As in every such situation, additional information comes into play. In the last 30 days, four other high school students have died in automobile accidents in your community, and all of them involved underage drinking. The police say they suspect alcohol may be a factor in tonight's accident as well. People in the community are becoming very concerned. Given this information, how could Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean help you decide which photo to publish and whether video is appropriate? Crime scene tape photo? Gory photo? Those are

the extremes, and you need to choose something in between. Would the recent cluster of accidents push you more toward the "gory" extreme because you'd reason that the situation should not be sugar-coated?

Each person in each situation may come up with a different decision, a different point between extremes. The Doctrine of the Mean helps you and your colleagues make a choice after reflecting on the facts. Aristotle wrote in his *Nicomachean Ethics,* "Virtuous behavior is to experience emotions at the right time, toward the right objects or people for the right reason in the right manner in accordance with the mean."[3] As you build character, finding the mean will become easier—and it will become "habit."

Kant's Duty-Based Ethics

We now move a few centuries ahead from Aristotle and Ancient Greece. Modern philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was born in Königsberg, East Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia), the son of a harness maker. At age 16, he began attending the University of Königsberg, where many of his professors emphasized individual moral behavior. After his studies, Kant became a professor at the university, where he taught for most of his life.

Kant believed following a society's laws is necessary, so order can be maintained. However, he also believed all men are equal, and no one should be treated as a means to an end. Kant's duty-based *categorical imperative* asks us to act in a way that everyone would agree upon; thus, everyone, following laws, would live in a free and equal society. In his *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals,*[4] Kant writes that the categorical imperative is the supreme principle everyone should follow in all areas of life.

Take note: For Kant, your will should be influenced only by reason; you can control your will, but you can't control the consequences of your actions. His "supreme" version of the CI states, "Act only on a maxim that you can at the same time will to become a universal law."[5] (A *maxim* is a principle upon which everyone can agree. "Do not plagiarize," for instance, could be considered a maxim to keep in the media professions; it should be universal.) Therefore, people should follow, or create, maxims that they trust all reasonable people would follow. Kant believed people have the capacity to reason, and reason should always come before desire. According to Kant, only a good will is moral, and a good will is determined by duty—not desire.

If you can't ask that everyone act on a maxim you have created, you should not act on that maxim yourself. For instance, if a public relations

professional constantly lies to make his client look good, Kant would urge him to ask himself whether he would want all PR professionals to behave this way. Of course not. This is not a maxim to keep because it would cause people to believe, incorrectly, that all PR professionals lie and are not to be trusted.

Kant's second "formula"[6] of the CI, the *formula of humanity,* states, "Act so as to treat humanity in oneself and others only as an end in itself, and never merely as a means." You would certainly avoid treating others with whom you deal in your job in a way that you would not want to be treated yourself. Let's say a reporter from your news organization doesn't like the state's governor. In the story she's writing, the reporter wants to use only quotes that make the governor appear incompetent—although she has other quotes that make him sound intelligent. "Choose quotes to fit your agenda." Is that a maxim you'd like all reporters to keep? No. Should all reporters use quotes judiciously? Yes. That would be the maxim to keep.

Kant believed our responsibility includes following maxims that make us law-abiding members of society—which, for purposes of this book, includes being a responsible media professional. As he wrote in another formulation of the categorical imperative, called the *formula of legislation for a moral community*, "Every rational being must act as if by his maxims he were at all times a legislative member of the universal kingdom of ends."[7]

Like Aristotle, Kant believed that if you don't have the appropriate moral education, you can't apply the categorical imperative. How do you learn which maxims to keep? Kant provides his opinion on moral education in his *Doctrine of Virtue: Part II of the Metaphysics of Morals* when he explains "the very concept of virtue implies that virtue must be acquired." For the media professional in training, university courses would be an appropriate place to begin. Kant believed in teaching his students using the case method as this book does, so they could learn to reason through ethical dilemmas already experienced by others.

Utilitarianism and J. S. Mill's Principle of Utility

The doctrine of basic utilitarianism says the best course of action is the one that creates the greatest benefit for everyone affected. In the 18th century, Jeremy Bentham, in what is now considered the "classical" approach, defined the principle in terms of pleasure and pain instead of benefits and harms. The doctrine has been both expanded and refined over the years, and today it has many variations.

Today, utilitarians often describe benefits and harms in terms of the satisfactions of personal preferences or in economic terms. Although utilitarians differ, most believe in the general principle that morality depends on balancing the beneficial and harmful *consequences* of their conduct. This idea is familiar to many media professionals. For instance, let's say that a state's director of disability services is not doing his job correctly, and thus dozens of developmentally disabled adults are not receiving the services they need. If the director asks a journalist why she thinks it's important to report on him, she might answer, "Look at the good a story could do" or "Look at the harm a story could prevent." The journalist is weighing the harm to the reputation of the agency and its director against the good the story could do for society—warning people about a problem and furthering the beneficial work of the social service agency.

Enter John Stuart Mill. Rigorously educated in London by his father, James, and Jeremy Bentham, Mill was tutored in classic utilitarianism as a youth. (He allegedly learned the Greek language at age 3.) In his early 20s, Mill had a nervous breakdown from his intense schooling. After his illness, he re-explored Bentham's brand of utilitarianism and came to believe that merely using math (the calculus of felicity)[8] to decide the number of people who will benefit instead of the number who will be harmed was not enough when making a moral decision. Mill argued in the 19th century that "quality" was also essential to ethical decision making.

"It would be absurd that. . . . the estimation of pleasure should be supposed to depend on quantity alone," Mill wrote in his *Utilitarianism.*[9] For example, he said the act of reading poetry was better (quality-wise) than playing "push-pin," a silly game of the time, although lots of people played push-pin. Mill's theory goes beyond the catchphrase "the greatest good for the greatest number"; he believed quality should also be factored into the calculation of the greatest amount of happiness.

Mill feared that a literal application of Bentham's version of utilitarianism could, over a number of generations, erode culture; he believed it is part of our human heritage to have desires higher than those that lend themselves to Bentham's kind of analysis.

To understand the importance of including "quality" in your decision making, think of the extremes media professionals might go to if they believed "the greatest good for the greatest number" is an absolute. What's to stop them from using lies, coercion and manipulation, or even breaking the law, as they gather information? They could argue that their reported information would help more people than it would hurt, then poof! They would have a justification for almost anything. Obviously, you will need to moderate these actions with a

sense of perspective. You know that deception by media professionals is permissible only in rare situations, when no other route exists to accomplish your goal, a goal that must be of extreme importance to the public. After all, why should anyone believe the information you present is true if you lied to get it?

Let's say you're a TV reporter who wants to go undercover to expose a carpet cleaning company whose practices have been a source of viewer complaints. You and a colleague rent a house on your news organization's dime and pretend to be married. After setting up your "household," you call the carpet cleaning company and ask for the advertised special: three rooms of carpeting cleaned for only $99.

The cleaners show up and tell you that because of a number of factors peculiar to your house, the cost will be much higher. Your hidden camera gets everything on tape, and you air the tape and story the following week. Although you believe you have benefitted viewers and kept them from harm, were you thinking of quantity rather than quality?

A carpet cleaning scam is not a life-or-death situation for the public. Using deceit to find the truth is justified only when the situation you're exposing is of extreme importance to the public's well-being and then only when there's no other way to get the information you need. Hiding cameras would not be virtuous behavior, according to Mill, and he certainly wouldn't consider "sweeps month," when stations hype coverage in order to increase viewership and advertising rates, an argument in favor of deception.

Mill would ask the broadcast journalists who are about to set up their undercover investigation the following: "How would you use my principle of utility in this situation?" He would ask the journalists to choose their means wisely, and this is where he differs from Bentham. Do the journalists have other means available to them? What about interviewing people who have been scammed by the carpet cleaning company—with social media and the complaints the station has already received, the aggrieved parties shouldn't be tough to find—then asking the company to respond to the allegations? People who watch a segment done this way would be just as protected from harm as people who watch a hidden camera exposé. No deceit is needed.

Similar to Aristotle and Kant, Mill believed that people need to cultivate a love of virtue before applying his principles, and he said that habit is the only thing that imparts certainty. A journalist, via habit, needs to rely on his or her own conduct when making ethical decisions. Therefore, merely following a quantitative approach to the greatest happiness, or greatest good, is no way to come to a reasoned decision. When decision making gets complex and you are on deadline, however, Mill said in *Utilitarianism*[10] that following the guidance

of basic moral rules (for the media, think codes) can be appropriate. He called these the secondary moral principles.

Ross' Prima Facie and Actual Duties

Welcome to the 20th century and to philosophers who work from the ideas of earlier scholars, taking them in new directions. Scottish-born philosopher Sir William David Ross (1877–1971), a leading Aristotle scholar during his lifetime, translated many of Aristotle's works. He presented his own ideas on ethical decision making in his 1930 text *The Right and the Good*. He was not a fan of utilitarianism (or consequentialism) and instead appealed to common sense or intuition.

Ross believed in *prima facie* duties—obligations that most people can understand and accept as important. Ross' prima facie duties include the following:

- Keeping promises (fidelity)
- Showing gratitude for favors
- Practicing justice
- Making others' lives better (beneficence)
- Avoiding harm
- Making amends when necessary (reparation)
- Improving yourself

Note that Ross didn't call these the *only* duties; he believed you could add to the list. In some ethical dilemmas, though, two or more of your duties will conflict. When this happens, Ross advises you to look at the duties on your list. Which one ranks highest for this particular situation? The duty that fits best is the one to choose. The *prima facie* duty that you choose is called the *actual* duty. Ross would say that moral principles are not absolute; principles, or codes, have exceptions. You should use your common sense.

For example, let's say that a PR professional has a client who is building a housing development on top of a former landfill. Environmental experts have determined that the site will pose no threat to future homeowners. The PR professional has promised her client, the developer, that she won't mention the landfill in press releases. After making this promise, however, she begins to weigh her duties again, and she decides that not mentioning the landfill to potential buyers will create more harm than good. The buyers might feel deceived.

For this media professional in this particular case, the duty to avoid harm takes precedence over the duty to keep her promise to the client. The PR professional decides to tell her client that she can't keep the promise and to explain why.

Sometimes called an intuitionist, Ross believes our duties should be obvious or self-evident. Although we use reasoning about our duties, common sense ultimately becomes the basis of Ross' theory. He's been criticized for believing that intuition makes a decision self-evident, but some embrace this "common sense" approach.

John Rawls' Veil of Ignorance

John Rawls (1921–2002), a contemporary philosopher and Harvard professor, created a concept of justice that many students find especially helpful in making ethical decisions. Rawls' 1971 book, *A Theory of Justice,* provides a theory of justice as fairness, addressing personal rights. When you work through an ethical dilemma, Rawls does not want you to think about your place in society—Rawls calls this "the original position." Instead, he advocates putting yourself behind what he calls a "veil of ignorance." When you're behind this veil, you must *forget* who you are; only then can you step into the shoes of others who are involved in the dilemma. Forgetting who you are means not considering your class status, religion, ethnicity or values. You consider the viewpoints and welfare of everyone involved because everyone is equal. When the veil lifts after the decision is made, you don't know what your identity will be; you could be master or slave, royalty or pauper.

Media ethics scholar Deni Elliott, the author of the next chapter, suggests taking the following steps when using Rawls' theory:[11]

- List all the people who will be affected by your decision, including yourself.
- Put yourself behind a veil of ignorance, giving up your identity, then assume one by one each of the identities of the people involved in the dilemma.
- Imagine a discussion taking place among the various players, with no one knowing what his or her ultimate identity will be when a decision is made.

Consider this situation: You work for an ad agency, and your supervisor has asked you to do a mockup for a print advertisement. In the ad photo and copy, he wants you to stereotype a certain ethnic group in a way that he thinks will be hilarious. You, however, do not see the humor; you believe the ad will cause harm.

Try working through this dilemma, preparing for a discussion with your boss about the inappropriateness of his idea, using the steps above. People to consider in this discussion are consumers; members of the ethnic group; your boss; you; and, finally, the client who has hired the agency. Can you think of others?

Because all those involved are equal under Rawls' veil, "The principles of justice are the result of a fair agreement or bargain, and perhaps the question will be answered."[12] A discussion among equals leads to a "reflective equilibrium," he said. A consensus surfaces, a contract, and everyone's principles conform and everyone benefits.

For both Rawls and Kant (according to Kant's categorical imperative), an act is chosen because of a person's nature as "a free and equal rational being." The word Rawls stresses is *equal*. Society as a whole will be better off if we allow for equality. Rawls' view can help us raise our social awareness when we make ethical decisions.

Sissela Bok's Test of Publicity

Contemporary philosopher Sissela Bok, author of the book *Lying: Moral Choices in Public and Private Life*, believes in the importance of justifying our actions to others—which means not only do you need to think through your decisions before making them, but you should also be able to make your decision making process public.

Although her model "the test of publicity" addresses the question, "When is it OK to lie?" it can be used with other ethical dilemmas in the media professions. Lying aims to mislead or deceive—and if a media professional encounters a situation where it seems that misleading or deceiving the public might be appropriate, it's time to reason through the dilemma.

Bok's ethical decision-making model is based on these two principles: We must have empathy for the people involved in our ethical decisions, and we must maintain social trust. Once you've acknowledged those two things, she advocates analyzing your ethical decision making in three steps:

1. Consult your own sense of right and wrong. How do you feel about the proposed course of action that is creating the dilemma? (What exactly is bothering you?)

2. Seek advice on alternatives. Is there another way to accomplish the same objective without raising ethical issues? You can ask colleagues or consult a philosopher's theory.

3. How will this action affect others? If possible, have a discussion with the parties involved. If impossible, conduct the discussion hypothetically, with colleagues in your workplace representing various points of view.

If you go through all three steps before making a decision, Bok says, you'll be able to justify that decision—in other words, it will stand the test of publicity.

Let's say you're an editor for a news website. Rioting broke out in your city's downtown area last night after a concert. If you decide to publish on your site the video your reporter shot—a video that shows graphic violence with police officers and citizens who are clearly identifiable—will you be ready to answer the public outcry that's likely to follow? Will you know how to justify your decision to the police officer shown clubbing a student or to the family of the student lying bloodied on the ground? Will you survive the test of publicity?

The acceptable justification is that the issue you're investigating is crucial to the safety of the public. Poynter's Bob Steele has a valuable checklist, available at Poynter.org, relating to one specific kind of deceit, the use of hidden cameras. Steele's first guideline states that hidden cameras should be used only when the issue being investigated is of extreme importance to society. "It must be of vital public interest, such as revealing great system failure at the top levels, or it must prevent profound harm to individuals." Even then, he lists five other criteria that must be satisfied before the deception can be justified.[13]

An Ethic of Care

Another area of contemporary ethics, known as the "ethics of care," is based on feminist theory and takes into account both self and other. In other words, this idea puts relationships at the center of ethical decision making. The ideas of two notable "ethics of care" advocates follow.

Carol Gilligan's book *In a Different Voice*, first published in 1982, points out that women tend to uphold an ethic of care in which taking care of others becomes most important in deliberations. Gilligan believes that women have a unique morality: They speak in a different voice from men, she says, because they have been taught a "language" of care and responsibility since childhood. People who develop a morality of care go from caring only about themselves to including the care of themselves *and* others—and, thus, being careful that no one is harmed.

In Gilligan's view, male scholars, including psychologist Sigmund Freud and educational psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, ignored the differences between men and women; thus, she believes their studies and findings about moral development may not always apply to women. Although later research showed that moral reasoning does not always follow gender lines, Gilligan's work helped to create awareness of the concept of an ethic of care, which is explored more in the next chapter.

Nel Noddings, an educator who wrote the 1984 book *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, believes utilitarianism and duty-based ethics do not provide an understanding of the way women approach ethical

dilemmas. For women, she says, ethics begins with a relationship. Real care requires actual encounters with specific individuals—it cannot be accomplished only through good intentions.

The first party in the relationship she calls the "one-caring," and the second person is the "cared-for." To complete the relationship, the cared-for must give in return. This could be through a verbal response or via the cared-for's personal growth, which is witnessed by the one-caring. In *Caring*, Nodding writes that she believes the following as a teacher: "The student is infinitely more important than the subject."[14] For instance, you may have had instructors who not only taught you in class but also made clear that they cared about your overall well-being.

Noddings believes people grappling with a dilemma should see human care as their main responsibility. So, to apply her ideas to the media professions, when reporters interview a source for a magazine article, it would be caring behavior to spend time with that source, to listen carefully and to record statements correctly—and the interview would preferably be face-to-face. Of course, this behavior would not only demonstrate that you care about the people you interview; it would also make them more comfortable and willing to talk to you.

An ethic of care may not seem to apply as directly to media professions as it does to medicine, for instance. Given all the studies showing that the public sees the media as uncaring, however, it's clearly important to demonstrate care in your professional work, thus avoiding unnecessary harm.

Concluding Thoughts

Now that you've learned the basics of some theories and codes that help working professionals make ethical choices, the next chapter takes a look at moral development and how it affects the way you make those decisions. You should be able to identify the stages you have been through already. After that, you'll be ready to move from theory to practice.

The remaining chapters of the book are true stories about tough situations young people encountered while they were students or at their first jobs. In addition to the narrative of what happened, the authors of the chapters share their thoughts on theories, codes or other decision-making tools that might be helpful in resolving each dilemma. You may agree or disagree with the approaches they take, but now you have some tools to help you think and discuss. As Aristotle would say, let the character building begin!

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CHAPTER 4

Focus Group Dilemma:
The Case of the Compromised Tagline

Nancy Furlow

Anonprofit organization decided to "rebrand" and scheduled a series of focus groups to test new taglines. The newly hired vice president of communications came up with her own idea for a tagline and wanted it to be part of the focus groups. Then, when the first focus group didn't reach the conclusion she wanted, she took steps to predetermine the outcome.

Having inside knowledge of what the vice president was doing put a young professional in a difficult position. She believed her boss was pushing the nonprofit in the wrong direction—but what would she risk if she confronted the boss or reported that the boss was manipulating the market research? Because of the sensitivity of this issue, and to protect an organization whose mission she still supports, the young professional asked that the names in this story be changed.

THE SITUATION   Rebranding a Nonprofit

In two years of working in the communications department of an environmental nonprofit organization headquartered in Washington, D.C., Jessica Shelby had found her job exciting and rewarding. Still, she sometimes felt left out of big decisions; she believed she had more to offer than was being asked of her.

So, when she was selected to be part of the small group that would lead a rebranding effort—designing a new integrated marketing strategy for the organization—she looked forward to the challenge and was thrilled that she

would be able to put her knowledge to good use. She thought the rebranding was a good idea because the organization was facing competition from other environmental groups, and she liked the creative ideas that an advertising agency had already proposed.

It was an exciting time at the nonprofit, but also a tumultuous one. Her department had been feeling pressure to get more media coverage of the group so that more people would be aware of its work. In her two years there, Shelby had seen many staff members quit, mostly to go to other organizations in the area—even groups that were deemed as the "competition."

Shelby's department had experienced so much turnover that she was working for her third boss. The new vice president of communications, Joanna Gilbert, was full of energy and enthusiasm—just what the department needed, Shelby thought. When Gilbert took over, morale in the department received a much-needed boost. "I really thought I was going to learn a lot from our new VP," Shelby said. "She was very approachable and easy to get along with. I was really looking forward to working with her."

THE CHALLENGE **The Boss Is Manipulating the Campaign**

The rebranding group's first meeting focused on laying out a strategy and defining the steps needed to make the rebranding campaign a success. Team members decided that a series of focus groups would be conducted in three major metropolitan areas to test communication messages and a series of taglines—slogans highlighting the group's mission—that an advertising agency had developed for the campaign. Everyone, including Shelby, was pleased with the progress the group was making and left the meeting in good spirits, tasks in hand.

At the next meeting, Gilbert surprised the group by announcing that she had come up with her own great idea for a tagline. The atmosphere in the room changed, and everyone squirmed nervously as Gilbert said she wanted her idea considered by the focus groups along with the taglines developed by the ad agency. After a little hesitation, everyone agreed that her tagline was good and should be included. No one expressed any other view.

Although she went along with the idea in the meeting, Shelby was uncomfortable with the way that Gilbert had made a decision before asking the other group members for their views. Shelby did think Gilbert's tagline was clever, but she also thought it seemed a bit negative and didn't fit with the rebranding strategy that the organization and the ad agency had developed. "We had already decided that our strategy was to be positive and not to project the

organization as a bunch of doomsayers," Shelby said. "The work that the agency had done was very different from what Gilbert was recommending. It just wasn't a good fit."

Although Shelby didn't feel as enthusiastic about her boss's idea as everyone else seemed to, she supported it publicly because she wanted to be a good employee and a team player. "I was afraid that I would be kicked off the team if I didn't go along with it," she said later.

At a great expense, the nonprofit hired an outside research firm to conduct an initial focus group in Chicago, to be followed by groups in Boston and Los Angeles. The report from the Chicago focus group was shared with the team, and the results did not make Gilbert happy. The focus group had not completely dismissed Gilbert's proposed tagline, but neither had it chosen hers as the best.

Shelby felt secretly vindicated that the focus group had preferred the more positive ideas; she was sure the next two groups would come back with the same results. Then she overheard Gilbert on a conference call: Her boss was telling the consultant to make sure that the next two focus groups came back with her idea as the selected phrase. At first, Shelby thought she must have misunderstood what Gilbert was saying. "I thought maybe I was jumping to the wrong conclusion," she said. But later in the day, Gilbert told Shelby directly that she was sure her idea would be the one selected by the remaining focus groups.

Upset by the situation and what she had overheard, Shelby considered confronting her boss. But fearing retaliation, she hesitated, and the more time went by, the more action began to seem impossible. Alone with her dilemma, she began to doubt herself. "I actually thought that maybe this is just the way things worked in 'real life' and that I was very naïve," she said.

THE RESPONSE **Silence Becomes Dread**

Over the next week, focus groups were conducted in Boston and Los Angeles. Gilbert never distributed the results or discussed them with the rest of the rebranding team; she simply proceeded as if her own tagline had emerged the clear winner. As far as Shelby could see, the other members of the team didn't question her statements or wonder why Gilbert hadn't followed procedure in showing them the research results.

Shelby was caught in a bind. It seemed that everyone else on the team agreed with the new strategy, but she wasn't convinced it was best for the organization. She believed she and her colleagues had been manipulated in a way

that not only ignored their experience and the stated purpose of the rebranding team, but also wasted money that donors had contributed to help the cause. Above all, she thought Gilbert's actions were just plain unprofessional.

"No one questioned the fact that we didn't get a report about the other two focus groups," Shelby said. "I couldn't believe it. I was beginning to think it was a conspiracy or something, and I didn't trust anyone."

Upset about what was happening, Shelby began to dread going to work. She felt she should do something, but whom could she turn to? How could she discuss the situation without being seen as a traitor? What would she be risking if she tried?

The rebranding campaign moved forward using Gilbert's idea. Shelby continued to work on the project, but lost interest—and it showed. She put forth minimal effort on the rebranding campaign and instead found other projects to work on. When a co-worker who had long been a mentor to Shelby asked her what was wrong, Shelby told her in confidence what she knew about the focus groups.

"I couldn't take it anymore and had to tell someone," Shelby said. Her co-worker seemed upset but shrugged it off. "She said that she had been with the organization for 15 years, and nothing surprised her anymore." The way this person saw it, exposing Gilbert wouldn't do much good. "Besides, she had a family that she had to take care of and was getting paid pretty well since she had been there so long. She really didn't want to make waves." Shelby left the conversation feeling completely alone.

At the same time the rebranding campaign was being developed, the non-profit was undergoing major restructuring and downsizing. Everyone was nervous about job security, especially the newer members of the team, including Shelby. She had begun searching for another position just in case things didn't work out, so when she was offered a new job at a different organization, she jumped at the opportunity. She no longer wanted to work for a vice president who she believed put her own ego ahead of the organization's best interest.

TOOL FOR THOUGHT ▶ **TWO CODES OF MARKETING RESEARCH STANDARDS**

Codes established by professional groups address ethical standards in general terms. It's up to you to decide how these provisions fit with your personal moral code and how you want to apply them in the workplace. The codes of the Marketing Research Association and the Qualitative Research Consultants Association might have been useful in helping Shelby decide what to do about her boss's actions.

The MRA Code of Marketing Research Standards asserts that association members "will never falsify or omit data for any reason at any phase of a research study or project.

Falsifying data of any kind for any reason, or omitting data that do not conform to preconceived notions, will not be tolerated."[1]

The code continues to say that researchers will "present the results understandably and fairly, including any results that may seem contradictory or unfavorable." Given Shelby's evidence that Gilbert was omitting research results she didn't like, the code makes clear that Gilbert's actions were unethical. Although neither Gilbert nor Shelby was a member of the association, the standards set forth in the code would have given Shelby something to rely on, other than her gut feeling that her boss's behavior was wrong.

Most organizations today work with outside consultants and agencies when developing marketing communications strategies. Consultants bring objectivity, expertise and a network of contacts to the process that many companies believe it's harder to achieve in-house. Although the client–consultant relationship can at times be difficult, it is vital to the success of an overall communications strategy.

Many professional associations address ethics, but none is more explicit about the client–consultant relationship than the Qualitative Research Consultants Association. The group's Guidelines to Professional Qualitative Research Practices states, "The client should not alter a consultant's report, either for internal or external distribution, without the consultant's express consent or without providing an opportunity for the consultant to disclaim authorship."[2]

Shelby could have used this rule to make it clear to Gilbert that what she was asking the consultant to do went against the profession's standards. In fact, the QRCA encourages consultants to use the guidelines document to clarify project issues with clients. By simply sharing the document with her, Shelby would have had a tool to make Gilbert aware of the awkward situation she was creating for the consultant hired by her nonprofit.

THE AFTERMATH   **Learning How to Speak Up**

A few months after leaving the environmental group and starting her new job, Shelby saw a public service announcement for her former employer, an ad that was part of the new campaign the nonprofit had developed. It had turned out better than she'd expected, but she still felt that the message wasn't quite right for the organization. Not long after that, a former colleague called to tell her that the group was changing the campaign and that Gilbert was no longer with the organization. The rebranding campaign ended up costing the organization much more than had been budgeted.

When she heard Gilbert was gone, "my first reaction was that I wanted my old job back," Shelby said. "I missed the friends that I had made there, but more importantly, I missed being a part of what the organization was doing. I really did believe in their mission."

Looking back, Shelby regrets not telling anyone except her co-worker about what Gilbert had done. Had she spoken up, not only would she have saved the organization money, but she might have been able to stay there and keep working for a cause that she supported.

Three years after switching jobs, Shelby believes she should have confronted Gilbert about her control of the focus groups. At the time, she saw the dilemma as simply whether to speak up or go along. Now, with more experience, she realizes the issue was really that a supervisor was violating key ethics of her profession. Shelby did not even think at the time of taking several steps that would be second nature if she encountered a similar situation now. For instance, talking to her former professors and consulting professional ethics codes would have let her move beyond gut feelings and find a concrete basis for her views, so she wouldn't feel the dilemma was all in her mind.

It didn't occur to Shelby until later that Gilbert's ethics weren't the only issue. She realized that if she'd used a professional code of ethics as a way to construct the discussion, she could have pointed out to Gilbert that not only was she being unethical, but she was also putting the consultant in a bad position by asking him to violate his professional standards. In fact, where she once thought of the issue as a tainted focus group, she now realizes that everyone else involved may have acted perfectly honorably, and then Gilbert subverted the process by choosing not to pass along legitimate research results that didn't suit her purposes.

"You know, since we didn't actually get the results of the other two focus groups, I'm guessing that the consultants told Gilbert that they wouldn't adjust the results to accommodate her idea," Shelby said. "I'm not 100 percent sure, but I have a feeling that they stood up to her. I wish I had, too."

THINKING IT THROUGH

1. If you had been in Shelby's place and decided to speak up, whom would you have talked to first, Gilbert or Gilbert's boss? Do you think Shelby had enough evidence to tell the boss that Gilbert was manipulating the rebranding campaign? What do you think would have happened if Shelby had done that? Can you think of other options she might have tried, other than losing interest in her work and eventually quitting?

2. On the website of the Qualitative Research Consultants Association (www .qrca.org), read the Code of Member Ethics and the Guide to Professional Qualitative Research Practices. Are you surprised by any of the guidelines for their members? Which provisions do you think would have been useful to Shelby if she'd known about them?

3. Think about what it takes to accomplish rebranding, and why a company would want to rebrand itself or one of its products. Check out the gallery of winners of the global rebranding awards (www.rebrand.com/

winners-showcase). Select an example that you think is excellent and explain why. Now find one that you think is poor and explain why you think so.

4. With the rise of social media, it is possible to conduct a virtual focus group using Facebook or Twitter. In what ways do you think this method would be more or less effective than in-person focus groups? Would use of social media make it easier to manipulate research?

5. Check out www.secondlife.com and see if you can find a focus group that you can join as an avatar. Describe your experience. What was the topic of the focus group? Did you gain any insights into the process? What does this experience tell you about using technology for research?

Figure 4.1 Screenshot shows an example of a community at secondlife. com, where virtual focus groups may be formed.

WHAT IF?

You were hunting for a part-time job and have found a good one: A company has put you in charge of building enthusiasm for a new energy drink on your campus. They're paying you to set up focus groups and report back on what you find. Excited about the opportunity to do some market research, you set out to facilitate the groups. Think about how you would go about performing the research. Here are some links to help you prepare:

- Lehigh University: http://www.cse.lehigh.edu/~glennb/mm/Focus Groups.htm

- Free Management Library, Carter McNamara, Basics of Conducting Focus Groups: http://managementhelp.org/evaluatn/focusgrp.htm
- University of Kansas, Community Tool Box: http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table contents/sub_section_main_1018.aspx

Before you set up your groups, you have many questions to consider: Who will do the research—you alone, or will you have a note taker? Will the sessions be recorded? What type of release will you need from the participants?

Where will you do the research? If on campus, what sort of permissions will you need? Will you provide refreshments (other than the energy drink)? Do you have a budget to pay the participants?

Who are the participants? How many will there be? How will you determine the "target market" in terms of age, gender and specific subcultures? How will you invite people to join?

Develop a list of questions to guide your group research. You want the discussion to flow, so avoid yes or no questions. Here are some things to keep in mind: What is the purpose of the focus group? How will you keep the participants on track? How will you handle participants who dominate the discussion, or others who never say a word?

Let's say you've conducted your research and are ready to let the energy drink company know your findings. Should you write up a report or just hand over your notes? Perhaps you've been instructed simply to tell the local representative about your experience. At this point, any number of "what if" scenarios might develop. Consider these:

What if the company tells you it really isn't interested in the results of the focus group; it's just been using the guise of "research" as a way of making sure people on campus learn about the energy drink. Would this be an example of unethical research practices, or is it clever public relations? If you think you've been used unethically, what recourse do you have?

What if everyone in your focus group took only a couple sips and declared the drink to be gross? How would you present these findings to the company? Since you're being paid to conduct the research, do you have an obligation to tell them something positive?

What if the company tells you to hide the fact that the drink contains 200 calories per serving and that the bottle, whose size would lead most people to see it as a single serving, actually contains what they're calling three servings? What would you do with this information when conducting the focus group? What about the idea that "energy drink," in this case, actually means a drink loaded with caffeine? The calories and ingredients are listed in small print on

the label. Do you have any obligation to point them out if your focus group participants haven't noticed? What should you do if they ask?

GO ONLINE FOR MORE

Here are websites of some professional organizations that provide ethics codes and other resources on marketing and public relations:

Marketing Research Association, http://www.mra-net.org
Qualitative Research Consultants Association, http://www.qrca.org
American Marketing Association, http://www.marketingpower.com
Public Relations Society of America, http://www.prsa.org/

Here are some links about how to conduct research through Second Life and the companies that are doing it:

http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Market_Research_Suppliers
http://www.socialresearchfoundation.org/
http://sl.markettruths.com/
http://pluggedinco.com/
http://www.mayarealities.com/

NOTES

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2. Qualitative Research Consultants Association. *QRCA Guidelines to Professional Qualitative Research Practices,* 2007. Retrieved March 7, 2012, from http://www.qrca.org/associations/6379/files/Guidelines1-29-07.pdf

FIRST-PERSON ETHICS

My Groundhog Day

JACK ZIBLUK

THE PH.D., FULL PROFESSOR of journalism I am today would have never considered handling a photo assignment the way I did as a young photojournalist three decades ago. Here's my story:

Until it ceased publication in 1994, *The Evening Sentinel* in Ansonia, Conn., was the first stop for many journalism careers. It paid minimum wage; the hours were long and erratic. We typed our stories on manual typewriters, and City Editor Garth Minegar marked them up with a grease pencil. He cut paragraphs apart with scissors, reordered them and scotch-taped them together, then sent the copy through a pneumatic tube to the composing room, where the compositors retyped the stories to be printed on the press. *The Sentinel* was one of the last hot lead–type newspapers in America.

Ansonia, my hometown, was a center of heavy manufacturing facing a steep decline. A massive flood had devastated downtown in 1955, and it never really recovered. Famous photographer Margaret Bourke-White covered the floods and so did another photographer, a young WWII veteran, my dad. I guess you could say I had both *Sentinel* ink and chromium-polluted Naugatuck River water in my veins.

It was an unusually cold winter in 1982–1983, even for New England. But that only brought more opportunities and challenges for the young staff of *The Sentinel*. There was more black ice on the roads (and thus more car wrecks), more school closings, more frozen pipes and more drunkenness and other related crimes. In February 1983, Managing Editor Robert C. Pollack assigned me to illustrate Groundhog Day. He didn't want to run a wire story from Punxsutawney. He wanted our Groundhog Day, and it was my job to find it.

So I looked for a groundhog. I called zoos, nature centers, universities and parks departments. Every naturalist reported that the groundhogs were hibernating, snug in their underground dens. After more than a dozen calls, I turned up one of the rodents above ground in a nature center in Westport, about 30 miles away. I jumped in my 1971 Chevy Nova and drove off. When I arrived, I found the reason the groundhog wasn't hibernating; he couldn't. He was old

and sick and losing his hair. He shivered in a cage under a little plaid blanket. He smelled bad.

Agreeing that the poor creature didn't convey the holiday spirit, the park ranger led me to a closet. There inside was a groundhog—and rabbits, squirrels, a bobcat and other animals. They were all very dead, stuffed and mounted. We took the stuffed groundhog, which stood on its hind legs on a stand, and ran outside. We put snow on its snout and paws as though it had been digging around its burrow. I lay on my belly in the snow, looked straight at its beady glass eyes and took its picture. I was thrilled that I had come up with an original local picture to fulfill my assignment.

Minegar smiled broadly and laughed at the happy-looking dead thing. Pollack said, "Great job, babe." (He called every member of the young staff "babe" when he was happy and "friend" when he was mad.)

I named the groundhog Monte in my cutline because he was mounted, and I wrote that he was the area's only nonhibernating groundhog. I left out the detail that Monte wasn't hibernating because he was deceased.

We all had a good laugh the next day when the paper came out, and Monte became a tradition of sorts. The following year, another young photographer came up with Stuffy the Squirrel for Groundhog Day. After that, most of us went on to other jobs, and I rarely thought of *The Sentinel's* Groundhog Day photos until I became a journalism teacher nearly a decade later.

As a graduate teaching fellow at Bowling Green State University, I realized most journalism students wouldn't end up being high-paid media stars. Hunting for examples that were more relevant, I remembered Groundhog Day and Monte. One of my mentors at Bowling Green was then the editor of *News Photographer* magazine, the publication of the National Press Photographers Association. I consulted him, the NPPA Code of Ethics and our law and ethics textbook. When I really examined my own actions and our decision-making process (or lack thereof), I began to think that Monte should have stayed in the closet.

The shadow of his smile
Monte, the area's only non-hibernating groundhog, tries to ignore his shadow Friday afternoon. If he sees his shadow again on Groundhog Day Sunday, he will be predicting, according to superstition, six more weeks of winter weather.
Photo by Jack Zibluk

The second rule in the NPPA code says a photojournalist should "resist being manipulated by staged photo opportunities." And the fourth rule says, "While photographing subjects, do not intentionally contribute to, alter, or seek to alter or influence events." I had broken two of the nine commandments on one easy story. If we had taken just a few minutes to step back and really consider the groundhog photo, we would have made a better decision. Even if we'd decided to go ahead, the discussion would have prepared us to answer any criticisms that arose.

So, nearly three decades after that Groundhog Day, do I think it was a mistake to take the picture or publish it? Let's just say that on every level, from staging a picture to setting a bad precedent, my actions were ethically questionable. The professor of journalism I grew into would never consider taking a fake picture. But a professor didn't take the picture; a 23-year-old working his first journalism job did.

* * *

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CHAPTER 5

OMG! This Band Is SOOO GR8!
The Case of the Phony Teenager

RICHARD D. WATERS

Working for an international public relations firm, Jennie Quinn was excited to be assigned to the promotional campaign for a new musical artist. Helping design a major creative campaign was a fascinating challenge, and Quinn was really enjoying herself—until she discovered that part of the plan for building "buzz" about the musician called for her to go online and pretend to be someone she wasn't.

Everyone else at her agency seemed fine with this plan, but to Quinn, it just felt wrong. She loved the rest of the work and didn't want to lose the project, nor did she want to risk her agency losing this big account. Could she find a way to serve her own standards—the standards of the profession as she understood them—while meeting her employer's and client's goals?

Quinn did manage to navigate her way to a solution. Because the promotional campaign is still debated within the company, she asked that the names in this chapter be changed.

THE SITUATION   "You want me to do *what?*"

The PR agency where Quinn worked as an assistant account executive had just won the account of an up-and-coming hip-hop artist who was being marketed to the tween and early teenage demographic. The artist's record label had chosen the first single from the new CD and wanted the PR firm's help developing a plan to launch the artist into superstardom. Executives from the record label were aiming for one giant hit that they hoped would kick off a string of future hits.

The PR firm began developing a multifaceted campaign to introduce the world to the hip-hop musician. First, Quinn and a group of staffers prepared a traditional public relations campaign with media kits, news releases and special events tied to the CD release. Once industry buzz began, the campaign called for a media tour, with the artist giving interviews to outlets ranging from popular magazines and industry publications to satellite radio and commercial music stations around the country.

Ten years earlier, this level of public relations campaigning would have sufficed for most agencies and their clients; however, the rise of the Internet and social media meant the campaign needed a strong virtual public relations effort as well. The PR firm created a website to furnish information about the artist's life, musical influences and upcoming appearances; to give the audience an opportunity to upload pictures and videos; and to provide an outlet for the artist's journal as well as chat rooms where fans could share information. The campaign also included a Facebook page for the artist and a microsite that allowed free downloads of an MP3 file of the first single, as well as videos of the new song that the record label hoped would go viral.

The campaign was well designed and reflected many of the principles taught in public relations textbooks. Quinn was proud of its thoroughness, and all was going well until she heard about the next steps. The client asked the agency to work on a buzz marketing effort before implementing the official campaign. Specifically, the music company wanted the PR agency to target virtual chat rooms and post messages on social networking sites with positive comments about the musician and links to the MP3 for downloading.

Many organizations hire employees to monitor social media and participate in online chats; those have become fairly standard promotional efforts. In this case, however, Quinn had a problem: The bosses told her and other employees to pretend to be members of the targeted demographic. In other words, Quinn said, still not quite able to believe it, "They wanted me to pretend to be a 12-year-old and promote [the musician] in chat rooms."

THE CHALLENGE   **Serving the Client While Staying Honest**

Ethical communication requires open and honest participation by all parties, and Quinn's public relations agency was asking her to lie to the campaign's target audience. Moreover, the agency was asking adults to lie to children and teenagers. Quinn felt fine about working on the campaign as an adult and letting online audiences know that a new hip-hop artist was releasing a single. The client, however, did not want the appearance of an orchestrated

campaign; it wanted people to see buzz about the artist growing online in what seemed a natural way.

With the growth of social media, public relations professionals constantly discuss how best to hold virtual conversations to represent clients—whether the comments are posted in monitored chat rooms, on message boards linked to blogs or community forums, or on sites like Facebook or Google+. At first, practitioners were skeptical of using chat rooms to carry out campaigns at all.[1] Gradually, some began to see chat rooms as a way to have conversations with targeted audiences, a virtual focus group where they could find out what consumers thought.[2]

Researcher J. M. Lace found that while practitioners often enjoyed these virtual conversations with stakeholders, they also questioned whether the tactic was effective.[3] Some expressed discomfort with using a screen name that did not identify them individually but rather as the organization itself (e.g., one practitioner writing as "OrganizationX" rather than "GW@OrganizationX"). Hiding behind an organization name was quickly identified as a strategy best avoided in virtual public relations efforts.

Public relations professional Susan Kohl maintains that individuals should identify themselves in all public relations efforts online, for example, by using their initials in their chat room user names. The openness allows users to feel a personal connection to an individual rather than interacting with a faceless organization.[4] While this strategy certainly benefits the organization, it also reinforces larger industry ethics practices.

TOOL FOR THOUGHT ▶ **THE POTTER BOX AND THE NAVRAN MODEL**

When Jennie Quinn's bosses asked her and others at the agency to engage in online deception in order to promote a singer, their plan violated two parts of the Public Relations Society of America ethics code: being honest and accurate in all communications, and revealing sponsors for represented causes and interests. By pretending to be teenagers and by not disclosing that the messages were part of an organized campaign, people working on this aspect of the account would be engaging in unethical behavior.

In addition to the ethics code, Quinn turned for guidance to two other models, the Potter Box[5] and the Navran Model,[6] both of which outline steps that a practitioner should follow to resolve an ethical dilemma. The Potter Box (see also Chapter 3) asks practitioners to define the situation; identify the key values that must be reflected in the decision; select the guiding principles of the entity making the decision; and, ultimately, choose personal loyalties to determine what decision needs to be made.

The benefit of the Potter Box is that it forces the practitioner to prioritize the values and stakeholders that are most important in a particular situation. As was true for Quinn, PR professionals juggle multiple relationships (employer, clients, consumers, online audience); they can't afford to overlook any of those relationships when making decisions.

The Case of the Phony Teenager 57

The Navran Model presents a simple step-by-step process for making ethical decisions in business. It asks professionals to consider their decisions in light of their organizations, the law and their own standards. These are the steps in the model:

1. Define the problem. Look at all aspects of the organization and its stakeholders, the interactions among the parties and the situation causing the problem.

2. Identify available solutions. Brainstorm a range of possible courses of action.

3. Evaluate the solutions. Consider short-term and long-term ramifications of each and their impact on all stakeholders involved.

4. Make the decision. Public relations strives to develop mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and stakeholders. It's possible for a one-sided solution to be ethical, but consider the future of the relationship after that decision is made.

5. Implement the decision. Once the decision is made, you have an obligation to your client and employer to carry out that decision in a timely and cost-effective manner.

6. Evaluate the decision. Did you properly assess the situation? What other actions might be needed to ensure the best resolution?

In evaluating possible solutions and your eventual decision, the Navran Model calls for applying filters that it abbreviates as PLUS: P for policies of your organization; L for the law; U for universal values; and S for self, your own definition of what's right.

Although the Potter Box and the Navran Model provide useful systems for analysis in decision making, Professor Shannon Bowen of Syracuse University notes that these models do not truly apply universal ethics, because they allow the decision maker to define the principles he or she is considering.[7] For example, Quinn hypothetically might have concluded that participating in a chat room conversation disguised as a teenager could be ethical, given that it was consistent with the practice and guidelines of her organization, and that talking with tweens and teenagers online about music is not illegal.

THE RESPONSE   **Refusing to Lie**

After thinking hard and reviewing various decision-making models she'd studied in college, Quinn found her choice to be relatively simple. She kept thinking back to the definition she'd learned in class: "Public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends."[8] With this definition in mind, she questioned why public relations practitioners would knowingly engage in behavior that could ruin a relationship with stakeholders. In her view, deceiving tweens and teenagers online about her identity ultimately could lead to the failure of the promotional campaign for the hip-hop artist.

It wasn't easy for Quinn to speak up: She was a young assistant account executive at a large global public relations firm where no one else seemed bothered by the plan for fake online identities. She stood her ground, however, and told the senior account executive and account coordinator that she would not participate in the deceptive online component of the campaign. She stressed that she would like to work on the traditional campaign because she believed in the singer's future, but she could not in good conscience pretend to be a 12-year-old online. As a PRSA member, she also said that she would feel obligated to point out the potential ethical violation to the association's Board of Ethics and Professional Standards.

Quinn had been nervous about making her views known—especially about mentioning filing an ethical grievance with the industry's governing body. As things turned out, however, she was not fired; she was not even dismissed from the campaign. Instead, the senior account executive asked how she would create buzz about the hip-hop artist's new single if she didn't want to follow the plan of masquerading as someone younger.

In response, Quinn proposed using legitimate means of Web communication—strategically placed online promotions and YouTube videos to drive traffic to the microsite that was offering free downloads of the song. Members of the account's management team were concerned that this approach wouldn't work in the limited amount of time they had; they were supposed to create Internet buzz before the special events surrounding the official release of the CD.

Nevertheless, the agency's management supported the decision to abandon the unethical practices. Instead, the agency carried out a legitimate social media campaign that used the singer's own Facebook and MySpace pages to spread information about the upcoming release.

THE AFTERMATH Honor Upheld, Business Lost

With this strategy, it took longer to build the buzz the record company expected, though attention did rise to the desired level by the end of the campaign. The record label executives had mixed reactions to the campaign's results. While they were pleased with the successful launch of the hip-hop artist's single and album, they were dissatisfied that the agency hadn't followed their wishes. When the agency bid to continue representing the music company, it lost the contract.

Quinn felt responsible for this loss of business, and she apologized to the account team and agency management. One member of the team told Quinn

that she had felt similarly uneasy about using deception to build online buzz, but she'd been too intimidated to speak out. Others didn't talk to Quinn about the change in strategy, but they also didn't act as if losing the account was a crisis.

Only one member of the management team told Quinn that he still supported the idea of masquerading as teenagers in chat rooms in order to get the message out quickly. He believed that hitting the chat rooms for two or three days, at strategic times when tweens and teens were most likely to be online, would be the best use of the agency's resources to meet the client's goal. When asked about the ethical dimension, he reiterated an objection that some professionals had been citing since the PRSA's code of ethics was created: A public relations practitioner who behaves in an unethical way may have his or her membership revoked, but that person can continue to practice public relations.

In all likelihood, the agency could have carried out the online deceit and not faced any industry repercussions. Both scholarly approaches and professional standards can help a practitioner reach a decision, and Quinn used both as she thought about the questions she faced. Ultimately, however, an individual's personal ethics guide her professional behavior. Facing an ethical dilemma, Quinn returned to her basic sense of right and wrong, and to the basic definition of public relations she'd learned in school. She realized that if she wanted to keep long-term, mutually beneficial relationships as a viable goal for her client, her course was clear: She had to stand on principle and refuse to participate in unethical behavior, no matter what might happen as a result.

THINKING IT THROUGH

1. Can you think of any situation in which it would be OK for a professional to assume a false identity online? For example, the police do it all the time to catch pedophiles. Why are media professionals different? If you believe this type of deception is not permissible for public relations campaigns, then what about for undercover reporting for a news organization?

2. If you were asked to develop an online promotional campaign to build buzz for a new CD, what elements would you include? Look online for effective campaigns for already famous or previously little-known artists, and describe the elements that work or don't work for you. What other promotional ideas do you have that no one seems to have tried yet?

3. What do you think about Quinn's statement to her bosses that if the agency went forward with the online deception, she would have to report

the violation to the PRSA? Do you think that mixing her objections with the wider professional context was appropriate for that meeting?

4. Imagine that her boss had allowed Quinn to withdraw from the deceptive part of the campaign or had moved her off the hip-hop artist campaign entirely. If other agency employees did pretend to be teenagers in chat rooms but Quinn was not involved in that behavior, would the ethical question be settled? Why or why not?

5. Do you think Quinn should feel any responsibility for her agency losing the music account? Why or why not?

WHAT IF?

In 2009, when President Barack Obama had 2.7 million followers on Twitter, he surprised many of those followers by telling an audience in China that he did not tweet.

Though most people realize that major public figures do not personally type each 140-character dispatch that goes out on their Twitter accounts, this was the first time people had heard that the president in fact did not write any tweets at all. Instead, a variety of communications team members used the @ BarackObama account to send information.

Defenders of this practice say it's simply the high-tech version of ghostwriting. It's long been accepted, they say, that presidents and other prominent people in government, business and the arts do not write their own speeches or opinion columns, even if no other writer is credited. With social media still in its infancy, however, it's not at all clear what the public understands about the origins of what they see.

Let's say you've landed your dream job in Washington in the public information office of one of your state's U.S. senators. In addition to the tasks you expected, such as talking to reporters and writing news releases, you're told that part of your job is to write updates on the senator's Facebook page, where her "friends" will see the updates under her name, just as they'd appear if she were writing them. When people post notes to the senator on the page, you will be the one responding.

You ask around and hear that this is fairly standard procedure on other senators' staffs. Still, you feel uncomfortable about it; it seems you're being asked to masquerade as someone else, plus you worry that you might accidentally write something that could damage the senator's reputation.

Would you keep quiet and write the Facebook posts? Or would you raise your objections with your boss? If the latter, what would you say? Check the

PRSA ethics code and the code of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association for provisions to buttress your argument.

Think about what compromises you might be willing to make. For example, would you feel comfortable writing the Facebook updates if the senator read and approved them before they were posted? How about if her chief of staff approved them? Would it be enough to have a conversation with the senator in which she tells you what she does and doesn't want on her Facebook page? Can you think of a way to present the updates on the page so they seemed more honest to you?

As you think about these issues, some tips from the book *Ethics in Human Communication* by Richard L. Johannesen might help. Johannesen proposes asking five questions when dealing with potentially deceptive communication practices:

1. What is the clients' and communicator's intent, and what is the audience's degree of awareness that the parties are working together?

2. Does the client use others, including ghostwriters and deceptive communicators, to make the client appear to possess qualities that he or she does not have?

3. What are the surrounding circumstances of the communicator's job that make deceptive communication necessary?

4. To what extent do clients actively participate in the writing of their own communication materials online?

5. Do clients accept responsibility for messages that are presented on their behalf, or does the responsibility fall on the unnamed writers?[9]

GO ONLINE FOR MORE

The Arthur W. Page Society, an association of senior public relations executives:

http://www.awpagesociety.com/

Word of Mouth Marketing Association ethics code:

http://womma.org/ethics/

Public Relations Society of America policy on reporting ethical violations, with a form for submitting a report:

http://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/Ethics/AboutEnforcement

Public Relations Society of America advisory on deceptive online practices:

http://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/Ethics/ProfessionalStandardsAdvisories/PSA-08.pdf

New York Times story about efforts to redefine public relations in the social media age:

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/21/business/media/redefining-public-relations-in-the-age-of-social-media.html

At press time, the PRSA redefinition effort was just beginning. Learn more about it here:

http://prdefinition.prsa.org/

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8. S. M. Cutlip, A. H. Center and G. M. Broom, *Effective Public Relations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1994).

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FIRST-PERSON ETHICS

How Good PR Can Follow Bad Reporting

JANE DVORAK

IN MY 28-YEAR CAREER in public relations, I have worked hard to be a reliable, credible source for the media. But when a series of television news stories unfairly cast one of my clients in a negative light, I had to reflect on my own ethics and values to develop a strategy for dealing with the fallout. Unethical reporting only increases the need for ethical PR.

Bad stories can happen to good people; we all know that. Usually, I advise clients to accept their mistakes, provide access to the facts and move forward. In this case, however, a reporter misrepresented information; illegally obtained and used copyrighted material; failed to present all sides of the story; and quoted biased, unreliable sources. In response, I needed to help my client stabilize his business and ensure that his internal audiences received accurate information.

The client was a health care company that focused on a specific treatment plan for immune disorders. The CEO retained my services after a local TV station aired a story implying that the business had compromised patient care. A second negative story was anticipated, and the CEO wanted help. Admittedly, this particular practice took a nontraditional approach, operating more on a sales model than a healthcare model. The TV story led viewers to believe that this approach meant the practice focused on attracting more patients, rather than on providing quality care. This was not true. As PR counsel, I was not involved in the business approach but rather with the perception of the business and its ability to provide effective treatment.

At first, confronted with the negative stories, it fell to me to do some soul-searching and a lot of research. To decipher what was fact and what was perception, I gathered performance data from the practice and conducted many interviews with employees and patients. The first story had caused a dramatic, nearly crushing financial loss to the company, and we knew more stories would air. We needed a way to manage this crisis, minimize the damage and ensure

that future stories got the facts straight—whether those facts were positive or negative.

The plan we developed aimed to educate our most important audience, the patients—past, present and future—with accurate information about how this health care office operated. We did this through letters direct from the practice owners that acknowledged the damning story, countered claims with facts I'd gathered from my research and asked for patients' understanding as the practice moved through this crisis.

We also prepared a fact sheet, distributed to every patient who came to the office and every prospective patient who inquired, to answer the questions we knew people would have if they'd seen or heard about the negative stories. Specifically, we addressed the pending complaints filed with a professional board. These complaints were real, with some credible basis, but had yet to be fully reviewed by the board or to result in any sanctions. Still, as PR counsel, I thought it was important that the practice address what people had heard on the news. To complement the PR activities, the advertising campaign for the business was revamped to showcase patient testimonials and highlight practice facts.

The result was resoundingly positive. After the first story aired, the office had received dozens of calls and had lost some patients. Distributing the letters and fact sheets brought an outpouring of support in cards, emails and personal comments received during appointments. In anticipation of the second story's running, a dedicated hotline was established to field calls and patient concerns. When the next story did air a few weeks later, and it also reflected negatively on the practice, the financial impact to the business was nearly nonexistent.

As a PR professional, it is my duty to "protect and advance the free flow of accurate and truthful information," the words of the PRSA ethics code's core principle. In this case, we had made every effort to cooperate with the reporter and provide the data needed for accurate reporting. We identified patients the reporter could interview, provided statistics and background, and worked to meet appropriate requests in a timely fashion. However, when the reporter's work and behavior made it clear that my client would not be treated fairly, I ultimately counseled the client to cease interaction with the reporter.

This is a rare step that I'd recommend only in the most extreme circumstances. As a counselor, it is important to remember that you control the level of engagement you and your client have with the media. I limited access this time because one component of the code of ethics rings loudest: "Be honest and accurate in all communications." That means dealing fairly with everyone: clients, employers, competitors, the media and the public.

When my efforts to point out the reporter's unethical behavior to the news director fell on deaf ears, I knew I had to fall back upon basic principles of conduct, specifically integrity of character. No matter the tone of the story, it was my responsibility to guide my client to a higher level of behavior by staying true to the facts in a challenging environment. In the end, I know that I handled myself ethically by providing accurate information; crafting a careful response plan; and, above all, protecting my client's interests.

<p align="center">* * *</p>

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marketing and integrated communications.

CHAPTER 15

Source Remorse: The Case of the Requests to "Unpublish"

Michael O'Donnell

The palest ink is better than the best memory, an old Chinese proverb says. Certainly, a printed story lives far longer than the people mentioned in it. But should the same be true for a story on a Web page, available for anyone in the world to see? Should electrons on a Web server be "permanent"?

What's written about us on the most lowly of websites can follow us everywhere. When a young professional Googles herself, and the top result is an embarrassing story in the college newspaper from years earlier, "source remorse" sets in. A request to take the story off the Web may soon follow.

Student journalists and their advisers at the University of St. Thomas received their first request to "unpublish" in fall 2008. Though that plea seemed like an easy call at the time, subsequent unpublishing requests showed the complexities that journalists must negotiate in these situations. Because the point of this case is one woman's effort to separate herself from a newspaper story, the name of the woman making the request has been changed for this chapter.

THE SITUATION	"I'm afraid my employer will Google my name and see your story"

The email from a graduate arrived two years after a story about school drinking policies had run in *The Aquin*, the student-operated newspaper at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. The story had appeared on the front page of the print edition and in a PDF version posted on the paper's

website. Alexa Kelly, who was a senior at the time, had spoken frankly in the story about her objections to the university's new enforcement measures for dealing with people found intoxicated on campus.

Figure 15.1 A story about alcohol policies in *The Aquin* caused embarrassment to a student.

In her email to the paper's adviser, Kelly wrote that she now worked for a suburban school district. When she entered her name in a Google search, *The Aquin* story always came up first, in all its embarrassing detail. "If my employer sees this, it could do serious harm to me professionally," she wrote, adding that she *knew* the paper could do something to hide the story from search engines.

The story clearly was embarrassing to a young professional two years removed from college:

(Note: The story below ran in the print edition of *The Aquin,* the student newspaper at the University of St. Thomas. It also appeared online in a PDF version, shown in the figure. We present only that part of the story involving the source.)

SOBERING UP TO REALITY

AS A RESTRICTED CAMPUS, UNDERAGE DRINKERS ARE NOT THE ONLY STUDENTS AFFECTED

By Ann Nasseff, staff writer

St. Thomas students turning 21 soon will not be as free from on-campus alcohol consumption policies as they might think. Contrary to popular belief among students and even some faculty, the university is not a wet campus. It is a restricted campus, meaning that Public Safety can reprimand even individuals of the legal drinking age.

Under the conditions of a restricted campus, alcohol consumption by students of the legal drinking age is allowed, but only at certain times, in certain places and in a quantity deemed appropriate and safe by Public Safety. Regardless of a student's age, if he or she demonstrates severe intoxication or is shown to be above the legal driving limit of .08 percent blood alcohol content while on campus, a course of action by university officials is warranted.

Remember that Residence Life contract you signed as an incoming freshman? Although many students questioned remembered signing it, few could explain what it entailed. That contract is one of few places where the on-campus drinking policy for of-age students is explained.

William Carter III, manager of special projects administration for Public Safety, emphasized that it is not the responsibility of Public Safety to raise awareness of the policy among students and guests of the university. That accountability, he said, lies on the shoulders of Residence Life and the university's dean's office.

A few students who know of the policy do so only because they had experienced it in action first hand. Last month, a Public Safety officer confronted senior [Alexa Kelly] after

she returned to her residence hall from a night at the bars. The officer asked to see her license and, after calling for the assistance of two other officers, proceeded to give her a Breathalyzer test, she said.

"They told me that I was 'quite drunk' and I would have to go with them so they could call a parent," [Kelly] said. "I didn't want my parents to get a phone call at 2 a.m. saying they had to drive to campus to pick up their 21-year-old because she had been drinking. They then asked if any of my roommates were 21 and sober. One of them is, so they had her take a Breathalyzer test, as well. When she blew .00, they released me to her."

[Kelly] is one of a handful of students who have reported being stopped on campus and talked to by Public Safety officers. The action taken by a Public Safety officer under the guidelines of the policy depends on both the blood alcohol content of the individual as well as their cooperation and attitude, said Carter, who also is in charge of St. Thomas' Strategic Planning for Alcohol Prevention and Abuse program.

"In many cases the individual has more control over the outcome of the situation than they may initially think," he said.

A website created by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism includes numerous surveys taken of college students in recent years. According to a 2002 survey, approximately 5 percent of four-year college students are "involved with the police or campus security as a result of their drinking" and close to 1,800 college students between the ages of 18 and 24 die each year from unintended alcohol-related injuries.

Ultimately, the officer uses the results of a Breathalyzer, along with his or her discretion and the student's behavior to determine the proper course of action. After being told of the university's policy on students 21 and over drinking on campus, many students find the policy too constricting.

"I think the entire situation is ridiculous," [Kelly] said. "Even if someone is 21, the policy is that they cannot be above the legal driving limit or a parent will have to be called. I guess I just don't see why it matters since I wasn't driving anywhere or doing anything wrong. I was being loud in the hallway when I was talking to my friends, but that's my personality."

THE CHALLENGE **Small Paper, Big Audience**

The Aquin distributed 2,600 copies a week to a university of more than 11,000 students on two Twin Cities campuses. The drinking story would have been seen by relatively few people had it remained print-only. But putting the PDF online made it available to anyone in the world with a Web browser. Despite printing a minuscule number of copies, *The Aquin* was among the thousands

of small newspapers that together make up a huge readership online, a "long tail" that reaches around the world.

The term "long tail" refers to statistical distributions in which the bulk of observations make up the steep part of the chart, with increasingly smaller numbers spread out in a "long tail." Chris Anderson of *Wired* magazine is credited with first using the term to apply to online content, specifically music. He noted that while hit songs on major labels add up to millions of sales, millions of lesser-known songs sell a few copies each. Together, those small sellers could bring a retailer as much profit as the one big seller.

The chart shows how this business principle applies to the readership of 700 daily newspapers in the United States. A relative few make up a large part of total circulation, but many more newspapers make up the "long tail" of the chart, with combined readership rivaling that of the larger papers. And this

Figure 15.2   U.S. Newspapers Average Daily Circulation* For the 6-month period ending 9/30/2010

Wall Street Journal 2 Million Circulation *

100 Largest Papers 23 Million Circulation *

The 'Long Tail' 600 Papers 14 Million Circulation *

Medina, La., Journal-register 1,897 Circulation

In millions
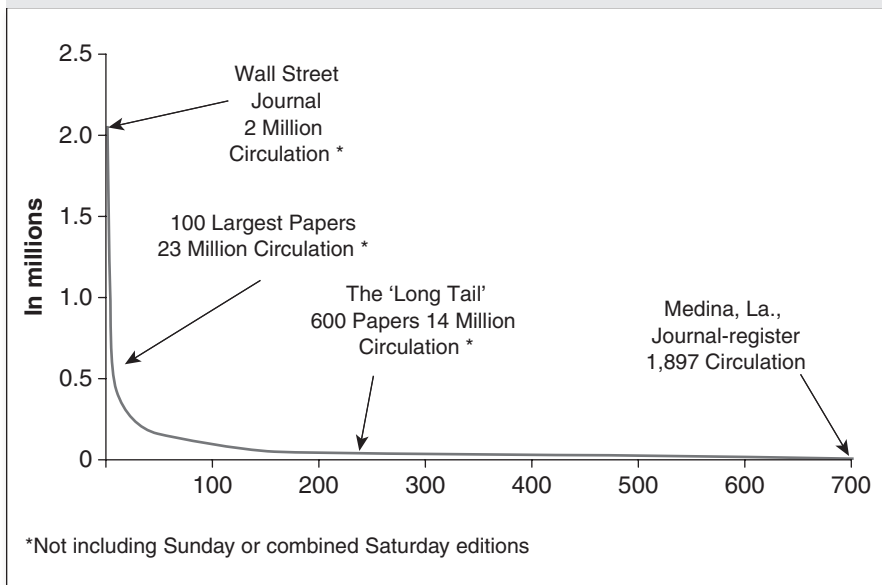
*Not including Sunday or combined Saturday editions

chart does not include monthy, weekly or bi-weekly papers, nor does it include college and high school newspapers.

Larry Timbs, Douglas J. Fisher and Will Atkinson, writing in *Grassroots Editor*, note that smaller newspapers, and to some extent larger newspapers, once published in a state of "practical obscurity." While their archives might have been open to the public, finding an article "required going to the newspaper offices and likely working through a newsroom librarian or clerk."[1]

When the same archive moves online, that practical obscurity is lost. Stories posted by small dailies, weeklies, blogs, online newsletters and college newspapers, all of which make up that "long tail," are nearly as likely to turn up in a search as something from the New York Times—as Kelly, the student who had spoken out in The Aquin's drinking story, found out.

<div style="background:#ccc;">THE RESPONSE</div>   **Trying to Dodge the Search Engines**

At the request of *The Aquin's* editors, the faculty adviser responded to Kelly's first email request by trying to return the drinking story to its practical obscurity. This meant taking steps on *The Aquin's* website to hide the story from search engines. Google offers online advice on how to do this but is firm in stating that it cannot alter or hide the content on any site. Susan Moskwa, a Google trends analyst, wrote in Google's webmaster Central forum,

> If something you dislike has already been published, the next step is to try to remove it from the site where it's appearing. . . . Google doesn't own the Internet; our search results simply reflect what's already out there on the Web.[2]

Google provides instructions on how to block certain pages from its search engine, and others, by writing a "robots.txt" file. When a search engine robot "crawls" the Web, it first checks any site for a robots.txt file that sets some pages off limits. All "respectable robots" will honor the directions in this file, according to Google's webmaster Central, with the caveat "a robots.txt is not enforceable, and some spammers and other troublemakers may ignore it."[3]

The Aquin adviser installed a robots.txt file on the newspaper's website, but it didn't block the PDF file. His next move was to add password protection to the PDF file, but that, too, did nothing to prevent a summary of the story from popping up in Google when he searched for Kelly's name, although the file itself was now impossible to open. He also requested that Google remove the PDF from its index of Uniform Resource Locators. Still, the story kept popping up in searches.

All these efforts took time, and despite the adviser's attempts to keep her up-to-date, Kelly assumed that the newspaper was stalling. Her emails grew more insistent, and she began to hint at legal action.

In the end, the adviser removed the PDF from *The Aquin* online archive. He reasoned that the same information would still be available in *The Aquin's* paper files and on its production server for anyone asking for it. In his view, the possible harm caused by leaving the story online outweighed the value of keeping it on the website. He discussed the move with *The Aquin's* student editor, Shane Kitzman; neither of them anticipated that this problem would pop up again.

Two developments made the decision easier: First, the university was planning to discontinue *The Aquin* and launch a new Web-only multimedia student news organization, TommieMedia.com. Second, the university library had completed a project to digitize all editions of *The Aquin*, going back 76 years to the first one. This archive, located behind a university firewall, was hidden from search engines. So the PDF was removed from the newspaper's own archive, and Kelly's youthful indiscretions became Google-proof.

In September 2009, the University of St. Thomas stopped publishing *The Aquin* and launched TommieMedia.com. The switch to Web-only publishing introduced students to the hectic world of the 24/7 news cycle, a shock to those who had worked under the leisurely once-a-week pace of *The Aquin*. They also found themselves exposed to a much larger readership—the whole world.

TOOL FOR THOUGHT ▶ **CLIFFORD G. CHRISTIAN ON PRIVACY AND MORALITY**

When journalists discuss issues like the unpublishing of potentially damaging information, they cite professional standards such as the SPJ Code of Ethics. This code and others outline behavior that is first of all concerned with protecting the credibility of news organizations and of the profession as a whole.

Codes are admirable, of course, but they concern what we do as professionals, not as human beings. Clifford G. Christian, a scholar in philosophical and social ethics at the University of Illinois, writes that relying on professional codes ignores the wider scope of "general morality," in which privacy "is not merely a legal right but a human condition or status in which humans, by virtue of their humanness, control the time, place, and circumstances of communications about themselves."[4]

This definition of privacy takes on greater importance as communication technology is transformed, making privacy "increasingly fragile and unenforceable." Thus, Christian urges journalists to consider privacy issues not within the boundaries of professional standards but in the wider realm of general morality. With this wider focus, journalists must develop new ways of thinking as they deal with sources and issues of privacy. Christian's advice follows:

Challenge the conventional wisdom. Editors and publishers often put the reputation of the news organization first and justify their decisions by citing the public's right to know or the need to maintain reader trust. "Journalism's self-interested definition of newsworthiness, rather than the common good, becomes the standard," Christian writes. A journalist can become frozen in this mind-set if he or she does not consciously try to think like the audience and sources—like Christian's "reasonable public."

Ask these questions: If you're citing a professional standard to justify an action, is that standard valid in this case? Is it universally valid? Will your news organization really lose anything important by violating the standard?

Treat people as people, not titles or roles. Journalists too often view the subjects of their stories by their roles: public official, victim, criminal, source. The SPJ code asks us to minimize harm but also implies that journalists should adopt some skepticism, advising them to "test the accuracy of all sources" and to "question sources' motives before promising anonymity." Christian advises that "sensitive journalists who struggle with these issues in terms of real people put more demands on themselves" because they refuse to see things only from the news organization's point of view.

Ask these questions: Are we treating a source differently from how we would want to be treated? If I replaced the source's name in the story with my own, how would I feel? How would my mother and father feel as they read it? Are we being totally open with sources about how we will use their information?

Consider the consequences, short-term and long-term, of maintaining information on the Internet. The Internet requires us to imagine consequences of our behavior that might occur long after we're gone. When someone is suffering because information published years ago pops up in Web searches, we should consider that person's situation *now,* not as a source who should have known better back then. We think of student journalism as sort of a practice journalism, yet student-produced stories, like any other stories, have the potential to cause lasting harm.

Ask these questions: What could be the long-term consequences of the story you're reporting? Should you discuss these consequences with the source before publishing? Considering those consequences, should you offer anonymity?

"The ethics of privacy is fundamentally a citizens' ethics," Christian writes, "understood and implemented by professionals as human beings first of all, not practitioners."

THE AFTERMATH   **More Requests, New Standards**

After TommieMedia.com launched, its editors received two other requests to unpublish stories. Realizing the importance of planning for future requests, three TommieMedia.com advisers and four of the site's student leaders met to discuss unpublishing.

As a multimedia news outlet, TommieMedia.com had a much more complex structure than *The Aquin*, with its one adviser and few editors. TommieMedia.com has five faculty advisers with limited roles in helping with writing,

video, studio production and technical issues, and a senior advisor with overall authority. It has one "director," the equivalent of an editor in chief, and three second-tier editors who oversee day-to-day operations. A structure with so many editors and advisers made it imperative to set a policy on unpublishing; otherwise, any staff person might decide to grant or refuse a request without informing the others.

In their discussion, the TommieMedia.com group used *The Aquin* story about drinking as an example because it represented the ethical dilemma of source remorse in all its untidiness, complicated by the special situation of student journalists. Unlike the adviser or editors at the time of Kelly's unpublish request, the 2009 TommieMedia.com student leaders had little sympathy for Kelly and her desire to have the embarrassing material removed. They were aware that the SPJ Code of Ethics (www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp) urged journalists to "minimize harm," but they reasoned that Kelly had spoken to the paper voluntarily.

Though her becoming a source set up what production editor Michael Ewen called an "unfortunate circumstance," Ewen didn't consider that a strong argument. "I don't think it's fair to go back and take her name out of the article because it's a problem for her," Ewen said. "Maybe she can address it in interviews, but I don't think it's up to us to change that."

TommieMedia.com director Katie Broadwell agreed that it's not a journalist's problem if people start regretting things they said years before. "Where do you draw the line?" she asked. But Broadwell did acknowledge that if she had read the drinking story with her name in place of Kelly's, she wouldn't have been happy.

"I'd regret talking to the person, the news organization," she said, "but at the same time I'd say, 'Well, I probably shouldn't have done that, but I'm not going to hold them responsible for me messing up.' Because it is ultimately their decision to talk or not."

They also understood that information on the Internet is different. Production editor Miles Trump said that "to look up the first story ever done on TommieMedia would take five seconds, versus the first story from The Aquin. That would take . . . I don't know how you'd find that."

TOOL FOR ACTION ▶ **QUESTIONS TO GUIDE "UNPUBLISHING" DECISIONS**

Kathy English, public editor of the *Toronto Star*, surveyed editors at 110 newspapers in the United States and Canada in 2009, asking whether they believed their organizations should ever unpublish online articles (meaning Web-only content and content published in print and online). Surprisingly, slightly more than 78 percent said yes. The editors cited inaccuracy or

unfairness as the most valid reason to unpublish (67 percent). However, none said they would unpublish because a source "rethinks what they want wider audience to know about them."[5]

English titled her report for the Associated Press Media Editors "The Long Tail of News," meaning that even a minor story is instantly available to anyone using a search engine, even if the story wasn't what the searcher was seeking. Because half the newspapers she surveyed had no policy to deal with requests to unpublish, she offered a set of questions that news organizations can ask when considering such a request. The questions can be summarized into a set of action points:

1. Establish a basic philosophy on the question of removing content from your website and create guidelines that reflect this philosophy, understanding that some "will want information to disappear because they don't like what was written about them or have changed their mind about being interviewed."

2. Make it part of your guidelines to listen and consider the potential harm to a person by continuing to publish, and weigh that against the journalistic values of transparency and trust with readers.

3. Decide what measures you can take to maintain the accuracy of published content, and how you might update online content in a truthful and transparent way.

4. Consider how you will handle requests to remove comments and other reader-generated content.

5. Consider cases when you might veer from the guidelines and decide to unpublish content.

6. Explain the policy to all readers and to those individuals who seek to have content unpublished.

7. Determine who can decide to unpublish Web content and set up a decision procedure, understanding that each decision should never rest on the shoulders of one person.

8. Most important, examine carefully how you handle sources as an organization and what you publish online when you know that anyone in the world can see it.[6]

Read the full report here: www.apme.com/?page=Unpublishing.

As the discussion continued, TommieMedia.com leaders talked of two other requests to unpublish a story. Both of the later requests were more clear-cut than *The Aquin* drinking story; taken together, the three cases led the group to a number of conclusions.

Unpublish for the right reasons. Journalists considering requests to unpublish must have firm standards while remaining flexible. If that seems contradictory, it's because ethical standards are only guidelines. "I don't take our

code of ethics as rules, like when you play Monopoly, no one can ever pass 'Go' without collecting $200," said Kris Bunton, TommieMedia.com's senior adviser. "The question to me is, What's the guideline in these kinds of cases? What's the sort of default position? Then you figure out, OK, when do we stick to that because we think this case merits sticking to it? The general guideline would be that we publish and it stays online."

Though the group agreed with that general goal, TommieMedia.com had unpublished stories twice in its first year. Bunton said one of those stories was an easy call because it contained apparent plagiarism. A student writing for TommieMedia.com.com had used material without attribution from another website, and the piece was removed as soon as someone brought the plagiarism to the staff's attention.

"Web, old-fashioned newspaper, whatever—we don't steal other people's words," Bunton said. "Maybe that was a snap decision, but I just don't think you let that live on."

The other story seemed innocent enough: It concerned a charity event, and its only source was a St. Thomas graduate working for a public relations firm. After the story was posted, the source's employer contacted the reporter and said that the story was completely inaccurate, although the employer's real motivation seemed more complex, with issues of proprietary information involved.

Shane Kitzman, TommieMedia.com's incoming director at the time, said he was "shaken" when he got the request. "I thought, 'A whole story being wrong? Who's at fault here?'" The source's arguments for unpublishing the story "were simple and they were emotional," Kitzman said. "She said, 'I was completely wrong and shouldn't have done this story with TommieMedia, and now I need it to be deleted or else I will be terminated at my job.'"

Though they thought that the source's unprofessionalism was her own problem, Kitzman said he and Bunton "agreed that, under the circumstances, we were naïve enough to publish a one-source story in the first place." The story was deleted from the website.

Although source remorse was a part of the second story, a strong rationale for unpublishing both stories could be found in the SPJ Code of Ethics, that journalists should "never plagiarize" and should "admit mistakes and correct them promptly."

Do the right thing *before* you publish. In their discussion of unpublishing, TommieMedia.com student leaders and advisers considered how the realities of the digital world might alter approaching and interviewing sources. When she talked to a reporter for the drinking story, Kelly might not have anticipated that this one story in a college newspaper would come to define her for anyone

Googling her name. In her emails, Kelly sounded like someone who felt ambushed—not by the original story but by its persistent life online.

TommieMedia.com published a series of similar stories on campus drinking in October 2010. By that time, students, faculty and staff members were thoroughly familiar with TommieMedia.com as a news site available to the whole world.

Although the series quoted few students, reporters still felt the need at times to discuss where the interview would appear. Theresa Malloy, TommieMedia.com assignment editor, said she thought to warn one administrator, an assistant dean who admitted to being a "hard-core partier" in his student days.

Figure 15.3 Screenshot of TommieMedia story on discipline issues related to alcohol.

"I said, 'You know this is going to be online,'" Malloy said. "'I'm going to represent you fairly; do you mind that I share your story?' And he said, 'No, I'd like students to know this story. I'm not sure what my boss will think, but I think it's an important message that needs to get out there, and I trust that you will represent me fairly.'"

He and his boss liked the finished story.

The Canadian Association of Journalists Ethics Advisory Committee, led by Kathy English, believes that journalists should help sources understand the implications of digital publishing. In its recommended best practices, the committee stated,

> Many who seek to have articles unpublished express surprise that the article was published online and remains available online and accessible through Google and other search engines. Print and broadcast journalists should inform sources of the implications of multi-platform publishing.[7]

Many journalists take a harder line, maintaining that most people who talk to reporters in the Internet age know what they're doing and understand what publishing means. "They know it's online, they know it's going to be in an article, they know they're going to be quoted," Broadwell said. "If they can't connect the dots to that, I don't think we need to say, you know, if you're applying for a job in two years, this could show up in a search engine."

Embrace the differences of the Web. The editors whom English surveyed recounted many situations where the Web itself could provide remedies to common problems. For example, when a website publishes a story reporting that someone has been acquitted, links to that story should be added to any earlier stories that reported the charges against the person. That way, people who find one story through a search engine will see the acquittal as well as the original charges.

Brad Dennison told English that GateHouse media had started a "sunset" policy pilot project in its New England Group. Most police blotter reports would be removed from the online archive six months after first publication, although the articles might not disappear from the Web entirely because of search engine caches.

"How long does something minor like a shoplifting charge have to follow someone on the Web?" he asked English. "My moral barometer tells me that's not fair. There's no rule that says this stuff has to live forever."[8]

Computer technology makes this sort of practice much simpler and automatic. In the digital world, journalists should shake themselves out of the linear habit and begin to think of a story as dynamic, continuing information that can be updated or linked in ways that ensure a reader gets the complete picture.

Recognize that students are different. Students make up the most important audience and an important pool of sources for TommieMedia.com. Student journalists are urged by their teachers and advisers to act professionally, but does that mean treating other students the way professional journalists treat their sources? Do college students, who are still trying out possible lives and futures, deserve a special kind of privacy? Members of the TommieMedia.com leadership group differed in their views on this question.

"We try to be professionals, so it shouldn't be different," Katie Broadwell said. "Yes, we're students, they're students. But if our true goal is to try to practice journalism in a professional environment, it's not student to student, it's professional and student."

In theory, that should be true, but Miles Trump said it wasn't always true in practice. "We look at it like we're professionals talking to people out there, but in reality, we're students talking to students," said Trump, who was Tommie Media.com sports editor in fall 2010. "Sports people I talk to, some of them are people I know [as friends]. So in reality, the relationship is different."

The new realities of digital publishing call for new sensibilities from student journalists. Someday, "student" will be what you once were. If once you were a student in a dorm who got stopped by Public Safety for drinking, and now you're a respected church member who serves with charitable organizations, are you allowed to leave your former student self behind? What if a student news site won't let your former self go away?

THINKING IT THROUGH

1. Given that one of the four main tenets of the SPJ ethics code is to minimize harm, would you have removed the story about drinking at Kelly's request? Or do you agree with the editors in the APME survey that "source remorse" should never be a reason to unpublish a story? Do you think student media should have different standards from professional media?

2. Have you had experience with requests to unpublish stories, either as the person seeking to unpublish or from the perspective of the news organization? Do

your student media organizations have a policy on how to handle such requests? How is that policy made known to student journalists and to the audience?

3. Kathy English, who wrote "The Long Tail of News" report on unpublishing, suggests this "script" for staffers to follow in responding to someone who's asking for a story to be removed from the Web:

Thank you for writing (calling). We are guided by a newsroom policy that says it is inappropriate to remove published content from our website. If an article is inaccurate, we will correct it and tell readers it has been altered. If relevant new information emerges, we will update the article or do a follow-up story.

As with our newsprint version, our online published content is a matter of public record and is part of our contract with our readers. To simply remove published content from the archive diminishes transparency and trust with our readers and in effect, erases history. This is not a practice engaged in by credible news organizations or in line with ethical journalism.

What do you think? If you worked in a newsroom, would you feel comfortable saying those words or posting them on your site? If not, how might you revise them?

4. Most newspaper websites are shaped by the print product, with its editions and sections, and with the "first the story, then the follow-up" approach. What ways can you make sure readers get the whole story as it develops over time? How might stories be deployed on the website or archived in a way that allows long-past indiscretions to fade away? *Should* they fade away? What do you think of one newspaper group's policy of having police log archives disappear from the Web after a certain number of months?

WHAT IF?

You're a student reporter who covers crime for your university's student news website. In your routine check of the campus police blotter, you see this item: "Officers answered a disturbance call at Wingnut Hall. Joe Smith, a student, was cited for being intoxicated on campus property." Do you post this item to the site? If the site does routinely publish police log items, what's the reason? What purpose does the police log serve? What rules does a media organization need in order to ensure that the police log is handled fairly?

Several tabloids and websites, including websites of law enforcement agencies, publish mugshots of those who have been arrested and charged with, but not necessarily convicted of, crimes. Would you publish those on your news site? Why or why not?

The Web offers several advantages over print that allow us to be more specific in identifying people. If several Joe Smiths attend your school, how might you use the power of the Web to clearly identify the particular Joe Smith in your article? Do ethics require you to do this, or can you just write "Joe Smith" and let people draw their own conclusions?

In Kathy English's study, one common complaint was that news organizations publish or broadcast stories about arrests but then never do follow-up stories to explain what happened to the charges. If you were in charge of proposing policies for a student news organization, what policy would you recommend regarding use of the names of suspects? Or about following up on charges that were reported?

What might Clifford Christian say about identifying Joe Smith in a published police log item, mistakenly or otherwise, in your news stories? Christian urges us to consider our actions not as professional journalists, but as members of a wider community applying the tenets of general morality. Rethink your news organization's policies in light of his recommendations.

GO ONLINE FOR MORE

Kathy English and a group of fellow Canadian journalists have developed a set of best practices for handling requests to unpublish—and for preventing them in the first place. Here is her report:

http://www.j-source.ca/english_new/detail.php?id=5845

Doug Fisher provides a summary of studies and articles related to unpublishing in his blog "Common Sense Journalism":

http://commonsensej.blogspot.com/2010/01/unpublishing-growing-challenge-for.html

Many newspapers are wrestling with these same questions, including *The Washington Post:*

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/06/AR2010080604341.html

The Poynter Institute for Media Studies offers a "webinar" on the subject that is available for a fee:

http://www.newsu.org/unpublishing-online-content-credibility

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FIRST-PERSON ETHICS

To Remove or Not to Remove: The YouTube Question

GEORGE L. DANIELS

WHEN JAWED KARIM UPLOADED the very first video to YouTube in April 2005, he showed himself standing in front of elephants at a zoo. Karim and co-founders Chad Hurley and Steve Chen, all former PayPal employees, had no idea that this first-of-its kind-service would change the way we produce and consume information online.

From its inception, YouTube was designed to do just what its catchphrase states—to let you "Broadcast Yourself." Things get trickier, though, when you're a journalist broadcasting not just yourself, but someone you've interviewed.

In August 2010, I shot video as a local librarian talked to me and my journalism students for a news story. Shortly after the interview, she resigned from the library. She asked me to remove the video from YouTube because she was concerned that her frank comments about funding for the library (or lack thereof) might make it harder for her to find another job.

I turned to the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, which requires that we as journalists "minimize harm." Who was the video harming? I had to consider how potentially hurting someone's career measured up against providing taxpayers with important information about how their money was being spent.

In the video, the librarian spoke about funding for the library and about another controversial issue, race and diversity in library locations. The SPJ code says, "Seek truth and report it." Everything the librarian said was true, and I reported it accurately via YouTube. In journalism, we don't need to get a release form signed before we can use a source in our news stories. The librarian knew she was talking to the class for a story, and she didn't dispute the accuracy of anything in the report.

To ensure that the video clips were not taken out of context, I also posted on YouTube an unedited version of the on-camera interview, so that people could see exactly what the librarian had said before and after the newsworthy sound bite. The titles of the video clips and tags (an aid when search engines are used

to hunt for clips) were designed to help people find both versions of the interview.

The request from the librarian came just a few weeks after a national controversy involving Shirley Sherrod, who was forced to resign from her position as Georgia state director of rural development for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Her resignation came after a blogger posted video excerpts of a speech Sherrod had given at an NAACP event. Although the excerpts seemed to show Sherrod recalling a time in the past when she had discriminated against a white farmer, the full video of the speech showed that she had actually said nothing of the sort.

That incident reinforced an important goal: When you post to YouTube or any other online site, the ethical thing to do—whenever you can—is to provide both edited and unedited versions of video. Once you've made the complete information available, be prepared to stand your ground when people don't like what they see and hear. If you've reported the truth and taken measures to minimize harm, you've done the right thing.

That's why I declined the librarian's request.

* * *

A former local television news producer in three media markets,
George L. Daniels is an associate professor of journalism
at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. The librarian's comments about
race and diversity may be found at the following links:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3Jc_NLx134

Here is the unedited version of the interview:

Part 1: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V107NKdn2GY

Part 2: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZ2b_CroMWs