NEWS/EDITORIAL PROBLEMS

Media Ethics in a Digital Age

School of Journalism and Mass Communication
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
The University of Iowa
Spring 2015
3140:0001

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OFFICE AND HOURS: Adler Journalism Building (AJB), Room W-313; Wednesday 2 p.m. — 5 p.m., or by appointment.

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CLASS LOCATIONS AND TIMES: E-254 AJB, 5 – 7:30 p.m., Tuesday

CLASS GREETINGS, GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:
Personal confession: I’m an Internet, newspaper, and magazine junkie. I’m a sucker for great nonfiction writing and can’t-put-it-down journalism. I go weak at the knees in the presence of a skilled storyteller. Terrific journalism can make for a lofty goal: to create meaning out of the world. It’s what the best journalists do — make meaning out of seemingly disparate events that combined, illuminated, and told in a compelling manner, create a new and important vantage point from which to assess your part of the world. That’s what makes good journalism great, and what transforms good journalists into great journalists.

This syllabus gives a general outline of what to expect in this course. It breaks down the semester into weekly segments. The first several classes will be a walk-through of some basic journalistic practices and tenets. The rationale: to make certain everyone is (more or less) on the same level.

Note: Some students in this course will be journalism majors, others will not. That you are a non-major may make the first several class sessions sound as though I’m talking in a foreign language. Soon, though, we’ll all be on the same page. If there are still terms or concepts unfamiliar to you, please ask me to explain. There are no stupid questions. We’re all in this course to learn; we all will access what students with varying interests and backgrounds can bring to the classroom.

The course has three main goals: to identify, explore and debate key issues raised about contemporary American journalism/media; to develop skills in analyzing these issues; and to exercise talent in writing critiques about such issues. The overarching concern will be ethics, particularly in the context of digital media.

The course is really two classes wrapped into one: a lecture and a large seminar. The syllabus provides an attempt of an outline; the main topics of discussions will flow from news events that happen during the semester, and as such, depending on what transpires over the next 15 weeks, we may vary widely from the syllabus. In other words, the syllabus is merely scaffolding on which to base a series of important elements students ought to learn. But we may diverge from it considerably. We’ll see.

Fasten your seatbelts. We will go where the news takes us.
The overarching emphasis will be American journalism, and as such, we’ll spend time looking at various editorial, financial, and ethical issues that affect journalists and the outlets they work for. We will examine the changing role digital media play in the dispersal of information. We will focus our discussion on the intersection of traditional media and emerging forms of New Media, as well as on contemporary ethical dilemmas reporters and editors face.

We will probe the long-term convention of U.S. journalism and publishing, which mandates an institutional “top-down” perspective. U.S. media are (as are almost all global media) decidedly government-centric. What the government says gets reported — usually on page one or immediately in our 24/7 “feed-the-beast” media machine. When the president/congressperson/Fed chairman/mayor/coach opens his/her mouth, whatever comes out gets reported. It’s news. Or so they say it’s news.

But it’s also self-serving public relations.

When it comes to feature stories, or coverage of arts, science, fashion, sports, business and culture, what we often get from the popular media is similarly filtered public relations. “News” about celebrities is concocted by teams of publicity agents; what they say seldom has much basis in fact. If it does, the “news” lacks a larger framework or context. Anyone who’s anyone in today’s media landscape has spokesmen/women, press secretaries, reps, or just “people” who primp (and pimp) their clients’ public persona and project it for us to see. In many ways, the media is complicit in such meaningless reporting.

Example: When Jenn announces she’s expecting twins, it’s the lead story in thousands of magazines, blogs, newspapers, TV shows. It’s what Jenn’s people want, what millions of media consumers seem to crave, what bean counters live for. Everyone makes out nicely, thank you. But is Jenn’s twins’ pregnancy that important in the context of the world and what’s truly important?

In other words, is it news?

By the way, such non-event coverage isn’t new or different; it’s how the media have operated for more than a century. But because media outlets have become so bottom-line, profit-driven over the last decade, and because more and more journalists have lost their jobs in the same time period, what gets printed, broadcast or blogged today is often exactly what public-relations practitioners have packaged for public consumption. There’s little or no journalistic filter.

Be prepared to discuss the news and how it is covered. For the next semester, you will be media critics. You will have license to be opinionated.

Note: Ten percent of your grade will be based on class participation. Receiving an A in the course will be virtually impossible unless you contribute in a meaningful way throughout the semester.

Think critically. Think concretely (and abstractly) about how American journalism could be ideally reconfigured so you might become better informed, entertained and engaged (all at the same time). Think about the goals and purposes of journalism in the noblest light, as well as the reality of journalism today and what could happen in the future.

A SAMPLING OF THE KINDS OF ISSUES WE WILL DISCUSS:
— The impact on media around the world in response to the January massacre of journalists at the Parisian satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo. Retrench or come out fighting?

— Should The New York Post and other media publish front-page photos/videos of American journalist James Foley’s beheading — even if the video of the murder is widely available on Youtube? What are the responsibilities of media when it comes to the “Wheaties” test?

— Have the media become cheerleaders for the businesses and institutions they ought to be critical of?

— Are the Kardashians ever news? What about Snookie? How about Vodka Sam? What about Sasha and Malia Obama? Why are the latter off-limit untouchables?

— Should The New York Times publish leaked, essentially stolen, government documents from Wikileaks, Edward Snowden, or elsewhere, if publication of such news is essential to our understanding of illegal government activity? What are the limits and implications of such actions?

— In today’s media environment where stodgy distinctions are blurred more than ever, who really is a journalist these days? Are bloggers journalists? And, more broadly, what is journalism for?

Ethical considerations will be the course’s underlying theme to evaluate the timeliness, accuracy and truthfulness of news coverage, as evinced in the above examples.

REQUIRED TEXTS:
There are no required textbooks, but ample required reading:

— Jim Romenesko writes a daily newsblog of everything of importance that happens in American journalism. Romenesko is essential to every journalist in the United States, and few go more than several days without reading him. You MUST read Romenesko daily for this class, and you MUST be prepared to discuss the items discussed in his column. The URL is: http://jimromenesko.com/. Check it out.

— Since this is a course in how news is covered, we will spend time each session looking at newspapers online, both local and national. We will look at these newspapers as texts: The Iowa City Press-Citizen, Gazette, Des Moines Register, and New York Times. Thorough daily reading of at least two of these papers is essential; you should have read them (online, if you like) before class.

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS:
Students will produce four Op. Ed. pieces. For extra credit, enterprising students will be given the opportunity to produce an additional project, which seeks either to present an original story that has been ignored by the mainstream media, or to recast coverage of a published story, presenting a vital but omitted side of the same story. Note: all assignments can take the form either of a traditional paper or a multi-media project.

Each student will choose four different topics for the Op. Ed. pieces. The assignment asks students to assess press coverage of a specific event, and explain why the coverage cited is inadequate, unreasonably biased or suspect. The Op. Ed. pieces should reflect how specific issues or events during the course of the spring term are portrayed in electronic and/or print media,
and offer suggestions for how such coverage ought to be improved in a manner that is practical and relevant.

The format of these articles should be similar to that of Op. Ed. pieces that appear in national blogs and media sites assessing press coverage. For these assignments, please do not choose news covered in *The Daily Iowan*, since that paper is primarily run by fellow students.

In these assignments, students are expected to form and express their own substantiated viewpoints. These pieces should be between 800 – 1,000 words each, or if you choose to use multi-media, about three-minutes (please present me with a flash drive containing the material on the date due). The extra-credit project should run about 1,200 words, or about three minutes if using multi-media.

Additional details on all assignments will be provided during the course of the semester.

Below are deadlines of work required in this course:
1) First Op. Ed. piece (if multi-media, no more than three minutes), **due February 10**.
2) Second Op. Ed. piece, **due March 3**.
3) Third Op. Ed piece, **due March 31**.
4) Optional Extra-Credit Project, **due April 14**.
5) Fourth Op. Ed. piece, **due May 5**.

Below is a breakdown of the components that make up students’ final grades:
1. Class discussion: 10 percent
2. First Op. Ed piece 20 percent
6. Optional Extra-Credit Project: 25 percent

The reason for the differential between the first and second and the third and fourth assignments is to allow students a learning curve to become more comfortable with the format of the Op. Ed. pieces required.

**GRADING:**
Grading is an inexact science, particularly when it comes to writing. If students are distressed about their grades in this course, please meet with me as the semester progresses. (It’s a good idea to meet with me, even if you’re not distressed about your grades.) Don’t wait till the last week or the last month. Your assignments will be evaluated on several factors: thoroughness, organization, originality, enterprise, focus, clarity, precision, concision, spelling, punctuation and grammar. Don’t pad your papers (I will notice). Every single word ought to be essential to the telling of your story.

Below is a breakdown of standards used in evaluating student work, with pluses/minuses as indicators within each letter range. The designation of A+ will be awarded only in extraordinary cases:
A--Exceptionally well written; arresting and probing, thoroughly researched and analyzed. Publishable as is.
B--Basically clear, cohesive, well thought out and well researched, with minor problems of style and organization. Needs some further revision and/or additional material.
C--Superficial, with organizational, stylistic, punctuation, grammar problems; missing vital detail. A major rewrite and additional research required.
D--Serious problems in both form and content. Requires substantial additional research and thought before a successful rewrite can be attempted.
F--Incomplete, confusing, fatal grammatical and syntactic flaws, which makes the piece unacceptable.

Students should expect to spend at least two hours per week per semester hour preparing for this class and completing assignments. This means a minimum of eight hours per week.

Exceptional work is expected.
OTHER NOTES:
1) The beginning of each class will be a general discussion of the week's news, and how the local, regional and national press has covered specific events. Be prepared to participate. You ought to volunteer. Your ongoing engagement and participation is vital to the course’s success. Fellow students and I will be depending on you to bring clarity and enthusiasm to our discussions. How can you shine (and avoid horrible embarrassment)? By examining and studying the news media required to be read before the class begins, as well as by reading and digesting Romenesko. There will be a 10-minute break during each class halfway through. The second half of the class will focus on items that demand our attention and/or material listed in this syllabus.

2) Students must deliver their assignments by deadline — the beginning of the class when the assignment is due. NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED. No assignment will be accepted unless it is typed and double-spaced or presented on a flash drive. Binders are not necessary, just the assignment (if paper, stapled, please; no paperclips, no torn corners). Students should keep a backup copy of their work. Proofread; use a spell-checker; read the work again. Then read it again. Then again. Polish it. Be your best editor.

3) ATTENDANCE IS MANDATORY. IT IS NOT Optional. YOU MUST ATTEND EACH CLASS. ROLL WILL BE TAKEN. If you must miss a class because of illness, an emergency, or a University-sanctioned activity, you must e-mail me prior to the beginning of class. No kidding. If you miss two classes without notifying me, you will be courting disaster. If you don’t show up, we may worry about you. Since meaningful class participation is factored into your grade, missing classes will negatively affect your performance in a profound way. By the way, merely showing up for class and delivering the required assignments is not a substitution for active and significant class participation.

4) Arrive on time. Late arrivals interrupt the class and are a discourtesy to other students. Recurrent tardiness is a sign of immaturity, bad planning, personal transportation issues (all bad raps for writers, journalists, academics, anyone). Don’t be late.

5) Turn off your cell phone and portable computer during class. Note taking must be done by hand. No text messaging will be allowed during class. Ever. If you text message, you will be asked to leave on the spot. Stay off the grid; you may enjoy the experience.

6) Dress appropriately. No hats, no pajamas. Treat the class with respect, as you would a job. This is your job for the next 15 weeks.

7) Look, act, and be alert. Get enough sleep. Come to class prepared to engage. If you must yawn, cover your mouth. Don’t smell your hair. If you must leave during class, have the courtesy not to do so in the first 30 minutes. As noted, we will have a 10-minute break; that’s a good time to do whatever is so pressing.

8) Discuss your work with me. No questions are stupid. Given a couple of days, I will be pleased to review drafts of an assignment or multimedia project. I am here to serve you. If you’d like to talk about the lecture/discussion/readings or about a career in journalism/writing, I’d very much welcome a visit during office hours. If you can’t make it then, let me know and I will rearrange my schedule to fit yours.

9) Plagiarism, or the use of others' work as one's own, is a serious violation of university, academic, and journalistic standards. Anyone who plagiarizes will receive a grade of F in the course (not just on the assignment). If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please ask. Students who commit academic fraud, dishonesty, or cheating will be subject to the rules and regulations of the
School, College, and University. Students are expected to be honest and honorable in their fulfillment of assignments.

10) Students have a responsibility to the rest of the class to help create a classroom environment where we all learn. Students are expected to follow guidelines set by the School, College, and University.

11) If students want to publish their work, seek to do so after the piece is submitted for this class.

12) All assignments for this course must be original and must be written by the student for this class. If students submit work not originated or written by them, they will receive an F for the course (not just on the assignment).

13) Students who have a disability that may require modification of course requirements in any way are encouraged to contact me so that appropriate arrangements may be made. It is the student's responsibility to contact Student Disability Services. For more information, please visit www.uiowa.edu/~sds/ and obtain a Student Academic Accommodation Request form (SAAR). The site will specify what course accommodations are judged reasonable. I will endeavor to make accommodations for students with physical or learning disabilities. Please meet privately with me to discuss such accommodations. I welcome hearing from anyone who has a disability that may require seating modifications or accommodations of any other class requirements. I will keep such requests confidential.

14) Students with suggestions or complaints about anything that happens in this course should not hesitate to contact me. If a problem cannot be resolved within the structure of the course, students are encouraged to contact David Ryfe, Director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication (335-3486) in AJB 305. If a satisfactory outcome is not obtained, students are then urged to discuss such issues with personnel in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (the administrative home of the School and this course) and submit a complaint to the Associate Dean for Academic Programs, 120 Schaeffer Hall, (335-2633). Please consult the Liberal Arts Bulletin for a full discussion of grievance procedures.

15) Sexual harassment undermines the mission of the University and threatens the wellbeing of students, faculty, and staff. Sexual harassment in any form will not be tolerated.

16) University policy specifies that students are responsible for all official correspondence sent to their University of Iowa e-mail address (@uiowa.edu). Please check your university email several times a day.

17) In severe weather, class members should seek shelter in the basement of Adler Journalism Building.

_The Iowa Dozen_

Students in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication are expected to learn the following principles, which — when spelled out — become _The Iowa Dozen_. In this course, we will be particularly concerned with items 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 & 12.

We learn:
1. to write correctly and clearly
2. to conduct research and gather information responsibly
3. to edit and evaluate carefully
4. to use media technologies thoughtfully
5. to apply statistical concepts appropriately

We value:
6. First Amendment principles for all individuals and groups
7. a diverse global community
8. creativity and independence
9. truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity

We explore:
10. mass communication theories and concepts
11. media institutions and practices
12. the role of media in shaping culture

CLASS SCHEDULE

News events are by nature unpredictable. This course attempts to track as closely as possible the news of the day. Here is the tentative schedule as the course starts.

Class No. 1
Tuesday, January 20, 2015
Introduction; course overview; expectations; assignments; grading.
Zero Intimidation vs. Real World
A look at Romenesko.
What exactly is news? How is it different from information?
A discussion on Charlie Hebdo. Crying for the death of journalists is one thing, but not a single major U.S. newspaper ever published the provocative cartoons that got the French satirical magazine into so much trouble? Hypocrisy or media business as unusual?
R. Crumb’s take:
http://reason.com/blog/2015/01/11/r-crumb-on-charlie-hebdo

Class No. 2
Tuesday, January 27, 2015
Course shakedown. Description of terms.
Romenesko/daily new critique.
Institutional nature of news coverage.
Bloom multi-media show.
Celebrity news vs. news about the baker, butcher, barista, bartender, barber.
Paper-based newspapers vs. the Internet: Examples of the possible:
— New York Times’ One-in-Eight-Million series
— Lexington Herald-Leader’s Healthcare in Rural Kentucky
  http://www.heraldleaderphoto.com/2008/06/29/audio-slideshow-clinically-impressive/
— Tobacco Cutting Contest
  http://vimeo.com/6835871

In the daily/hourly/minute-by-minute news mix that we get, seldom do we find stories of working-class, middle-class, or poor people. Untelegenic people need not worry. Their stories will be ignored. Main Street has ceded any relevance it may once have had to inside the Washington Beltway, or to the nation’s twin citadels of media muscle — New York and Los Angeles.
Take a look at the famous 1976 Saul Steinberg *New Yorker* cover (with D.C. and L.A. all grown up). Discuss.
Class No. 3
Tuesday, February 3, 2015
Romenesko/daily new critique.
We listen to Bruce Springsteen, and make meaning out of the lyrics to *Philadelphia*.
If there’s a compelling story outside the media’s customary geographic contours, it’s about a hurricane, tornado, fire, earthquake, perhaps multiple murders (school massacres are favorites). Pestilence must reign. Riveting images are essential. If it bleeds, it leads. Stories about ordinary people in out-of-the-way flyover country just don’t make it into the mix. If they do, their toast after several days. The rare story outside our comfort zone is an outlier. Mainstream American consumers are apparently accustomed to (and seemingly comfortable with) such a impoverished media menu. *And* woe to anyone who’s interested in in-depth foreign news. Such coverage in the U.S. press is by and large nonexistent. Bye-bye world.

A look at StoryCorps:

A brief look at The Oxford Project:
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lwUA8jZFlg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lwUA8jZFlg)

First Op. Ed. piece due next week.

Class No. 4
Tuesday, February 10, 2015
**First Op. Ed. Piece due.**
Romenesko/Daily News Critique.
News is becoming entertainment and entertainment is becoming news. Local television especially has turned into a vehicle for lite news, emphasizing weather and traffic reports as well as crime; local news has moved away from coverage of serious civic matters. Local TV news often uses silly gimmicks to draw viewers, especially during rating periods. What is presented as news on TV is not always what makes news in newspapers and vice-versa.

American Exceptionalism: We look at an amazing clip from HBO’s *Newsroom*:
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VMqcLUqYqrs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VMqcLUqYqrs)

We look at clips from *Hearts and Minds*, as well as Mitt Romney, Barack Obama and Herman Cain:
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huFh760p-MA&noredirect=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huFh760p-MA&noredirect=1)
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0zM83F6oWk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0zM83F6oWk)
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QgSj-MLpl-8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QgSj-MLpl-8)
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1E5NmmySy0&noredirect=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1E5NmmySy0&noredirect=1)

Iowa Exceptionalism, and how it affects local and regional news. Hometown boosterism and Agenda Journalism.

How the Iowa press looks at itself.

Are the Kardashians *ever* news? What about Snookie? How about Vodka Sam? What about Sasha and Malia Obama?

Class No. 5
Tuesday, February 17, 2015
Romenesko/daily new critique.
Gossip and Sex: How the press covers it.
A frank discussion of ethics.
*Is The Bachelor* news
Class No. 6
Tuesday, February 24, 2015
Romenesko/daily new critique.
Objectivity, fairness, balance and bias. Action figures galore.
Has objectivity become passé? The difference between truth and accuracy. “Absence of Malice” on sharks and fish. Is objectivity a goal or a method? Is it possible? Should fairness and balance be journalistic goals? Is journalistic balance always justified? How about just telling it “like it is?”

Class No. 7
Tuesday, March 3, 2015
Romenesko/daily new critique.
Dancer Falls Tape.
Suicide on the C&O. The story of Frank, and “Cruel Exploitation of a Tragedy.”
Politically correct newsrooms? Seductions of power. Whatever happened to “Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable” Media handlers; spin doctors; how politicians, business bulldoze past the press to bring their message directly to the people.

Class No. 8
Tuesday, March 10, 2015
Romenesko/daily new critique.
The Wheaties Test.
Should The New York Post and other media publish front-page photos/videos of American journalist James Foley’s beheading — even if videos of the murder is available on Youtube? How we cover death.
Casualty of war:
http://www.collateralmurder.com/

SPRING BREAK

Class No. 9
Tuesday, March 24, 2015
Daily News Critique/Romensko.
Poor little Sammy Lussier: Was it really a fish that took 168 stitches out of his left leg? We look at coverage of “the mystery fish” from the Miami Herald and the Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel. Examples that reveal a basic fact: news must be profitable.
Have the media become cheerleaders for the businesses and institutions they ought to be critical of?

Class No. 10
Tuesday, March 31, 2015
Daily News Critique/Romensko.
NYT Op-Docs

10
Class No. 11
Tuesday, April 7, 2015
Romnesko/daily new critque.
Ethics and coverage of news. Paying for coverage.
Controlling the press has never been easier. A ravaged, eviscerated U.S. media is a serious casualty in any democracy, and more and politicians and image-makers are turning this malady to their advantage.

Extra-Credit Assignment due April 14.

Class No. 12
Tuesday, April 14, 2015
Romnesko/daily new critque.
Open discussion.

Class No. 13
Tuesday, April 21, 2015
Romnesko/daily new critque.
Monetizing the web. How.

Class No. 14
Tuesday, April 28, 2015
Romnesko/daily new critque.
In today’s media environment where distinctions are blurred more than ever, who is a journalist? Are bloggers journalists? And, more broadly, what is journalism for?


Class No. 15
Tuesday, May 5, 2015
Romnesko/daily new critque.
Catch-up; review; the news of tomorrow.
27 Items All University of Iowa Students Need To Know
Where you fit in.

This schedule is tentative and subject to adjustment as the term unfolds.