**Media Ethics in a Digital Age & Diversity Issues in Journalism**

JMC:2700:0001  
Spring 2021  
School of Journalism and Mass Communication  
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences  
The University of Iowa

**PROFESSOR:** Stephen G. Bloom (he, him, his)

**TEACHING ASSISTANT:** Courtney Brennaman (she, her, hers)

**PROFESSOR’S VIRTUAL DROP-IN HOURS VIA ZOOM:** Tuesday 12:30 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.; please email for an appointment.

**TEACHING ASSISTANT’S VIRTUAL DROP-IN HOURS VIA ZOOM:** Monday 12:00 p.m.-3:00 p.m.; please email for an appointment.

**E-MAILS:**  
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Courtney Brennaman: courtney-brennaman@uiowa.edu

**CLASS TIMES:** Monday and Wednesday, 3:30 – 4:45 p.m., online via Zoom.

**THIS CLASS WILL BE TAUGHT ONLINE VIA ZOOM. IT IS “SYNCHRONOUS,” WHICH MEANS THAT STUDENTS MUST ATTEND ALL CLASSES DURING THE ABOVE TIMES. THE COURSE IS NEITHER ASYNCHRONOUS NOR HYBRID. UNLESS DOCUMENTED EXCEPTIONS ARE APPROVED IN ADVANCE, STUDENTS ARE REQUIRED TO ATTEND THE CLASS AT THE ABOVE TIMES.**

**THE RECURRING ZOOM LINK THROUGHOUT THE SEMESTER IS:**

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES:**

In this course, we will primarily focus on Media Ethics and Diversity, as follows:

**Learning Objective 1:** Students will demonstrate an ability to anticipate and recognize ethical issues when they arise and to reason through them, taking multiple perspectives and contexts into account.  
**Learning Objective 2:** Students will demonstrate an ability to explain ethical approaches and reasoning about a particular dilemma in terms that can be understood by a diverse group of people.

We will cover multicultural issues, as follows:

**Learning Objective 1:** Students will demonstrate an ability to assess media that serve the needs and interests of diverse communities and reflect their voices and experiences. Students will learn about implicit bias.  
**Learning Objective 2:** Students will demonstrate sensitivity to and understanding of various cultures, histories, perspectives, socio-economic and political conditions of diverse groups.
Learning Objective 3: Students will demonstrate an interest in learning about how diverse groups might better engage with the media over issues of common interest.

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 love 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, which combined, illuminated, and told in a compelling manner, create a vital vantage point from which to assess the world (at least, your part of the world). That’s what makes good journalism great, and what can transform good journalists into great journalists.

The best journalists seek to heal some part of the world. They do that by telling the truth in well-reported, fact-checked essential stories. Often such truths are hard to swallow. But, nonetheless, such reporting is essential to our wellbeing as members of any community in which we live, work, or consider ourselves members. Make no mistake about it: Journalism is a courageous undertaking. When performed well, it ought to be praised, not derided. It can—and often does—change the world.

This syllabus gives a general outline of what to expect over the course of a 15-week semester. It breaks down the semester into weekly segments. The first several classes will be a walk-through of some basic journalistic practices and tenets, along with identifying issues of ethics and diversity. Note: Most students will be journalism majors, some will not. That you are a non-major may make the first sessions sound as though I’m talking in a foreign language. Don’t despair. Soon, we’ll all be on the same page. If there are terms or concepts unfamiliar to you, please ask me to explain. There are no stupid questions. If you don’t know the terms or concepts I’m talking about, chances are good that other students won’t know, either. I appreciate your sharing all your questions with the rest of the class. I also acknowledge how difficult tiptoeing into the public space of the Zoom classroom may be. I’ll try my hardest to create a supportive learning space that welcomes such discussion. You can always see me during Zoom drop-in hours, too.

The course has two main goals: 1) to identify, explore, and analyze key ethical issues concerning contemporary American journalism/media; and 2) to develop skills in assessing issues of diversity in the context of the print and digital media landscape today.

The syllabus provides an attempt of an outline; but much of our class discussion 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 from the syllabus. In other words, the syllabus is a scaffolding upon which we will base a series of important elements/issues that students will learn during the course of the semester. We’ll see how the upcoming 15 weeks unfold. We will host many celebrated journalists via Zoom in this class this semester; their timetables are fluid, but the dates they are scheduled to visit appear in the below syllabus.

The concept of this class is to present a concept on Monday, often through a guest lecturer or a lecture by the professor. On Wednesday, we will explore as a class the relevant issues raised by our discussion the previous Monday. We will often seek to facilitate discussion by utilizing the break-out-session function of Zoom, convening into smaller groups.

Fasten your seatbelts. We will go where the news takes us. This semester ought to escort us to some wild and wooly places. We’ll descend into a variety of thorny ethical dilemmas, along with a dive into contemporary diversity issues. We’ll take on fake news stories. We’ll follow how
press coverage can be slanted, and how government spokespeople (and occasionally reporters) are often ministers of propaganda. In discussing these issues, I believe we will be able to address them in an engaging, non-partisan manner. Whether you support President Biden or not, whether you’re a Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, Green Party member, Independent, or apathetic political non-believer, we’ll try to analyze press performance and ethical issues as they relate to fundamental issues of democracy. This class isn’t about politics, but our discussions will assuredly veer into press coverage of them.

The overarching emphasis will be American journalism, and as such, we’ll spend the bulk of our time looking at racial, editorial, financial, and ethical issues that affect journalists and the outlets they work for. We’ll examine the changing role digital media play in the dispersal of information. We’ll focus our attention on the intersection of traditional media and emerging forms of New Media, as well as on contemporary dilemmas reporters and editors face. Much of the discussion will cover issues of diversity in a host of micro and macro ways. At times, we will be merciless when it comes to our criticism of national and local media coverage of news events. We won’t play favorites. Be prepared to push aside preconceived notions of media, ethics, and diversity. This can be unsettling, but it’s what learning often is about.

While we are doing all of the above, we’ll also probe the long-term convention of U.S. journalism and publishing, which generally 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, instantly online, or on television in our 24/7 “feed-the-beast” media machine. When the president/congressperson/Fed chairman/mayor/coach open their mouths, whatever comes out gets reported. It’s news. Or so they say it is.

But is it?

Are government assertions that are inaccurate and untruthful news? When should the media critically interpret and when should it merely report without context and analysis? Can news coverage ever truly be objective? What’s the difference between news, information, strategic communication, and public relations? These are fundamental questions we will address.

What gets published in the popular media is often filtered public relations. “News” is often concocted by teams of publicity/press agents; what they say seldom has a solid basis in fact. If the news consumer can find any legitimate “facts,” they generally lack a larger framework or context. Anyone who’s anyone in today’s media landscape has spokesmen/spokeswomen, press secretaries, reps, or just “people” who primp (and pimp) their clients’ public persona and project it for us to consume in the most advantageous of lights. In almost all ways, the media are complicit in such reporting. It’s what often grabs eyeballs—and, accordingly, revenue.

Example: When Kim Kardashian announces she and Kanye West are getting a divorce, it’s the lead story in thousands of magazines, blogs, newspapers, TV shows, and websites. It’s what Kardashian’s people want, what millions of her fans are expected to crave, what media bean counters (anyone knows what this phrase means?) live for. Everyone makes out nicely, thank you.

But is the Kardashian/West split really important in the context of the world and in what’s essential to our lives?

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 and profit-driven over the last decade, and because more and more journalists have lost their jobs in the same time period of time, what gets printed, broadcast or blogged today is often exactly what public-relations practitioners—including the government—have packaged for public consumption. What once was an essential filter—*journalists*—have effectively been shown the door. They are bypassed often. On the way to the door, whether rightly or wrongly, they’ve been humiliated by a former administration that has flatly labeled the press “the enemy of the people.”

How can we make informed decisions that dramatically affect our lives, based on under-reported or falsely reported news?

Be prepared to discuss the news and how it is (or not) covered. You’ll be prompted to be lively, thoughtful, and wise. I’ll act as the facilitator; students will carry forth the bulk of the discussion in the course. Experience has shown that those who contribute to meaningful class discussion will be more centrally involved in the class, and may take away a greater sense of the course’s objectives.

Think critically. Think concretely (and abstractly) about how American journalism might be reconfigured so the public could become better informed, educated, and engaged (all at the same time!). Think about the goals and purposes of journalism, ethics, and diversity in the noblest light, as well as the realities of today, and what *could* happen in American journalism to better serve all of us.

There is no textbook. In addition to the topics listed below on the weekly schedule, and prompted issues raised by the guest lecturers, we will follow a protocol of case studies of ethical and DEI issues posted on ICON as indicated in the below timetable of class readings. You are responsible for the content and understanding of each of these case studies. These case studies are found on ICON under the File tab. The case studies and handouts are printed in bold on the syllabus.

You will need to take notes based on our discussions each Monday and Wednesday; this is necessary to perform well on the four essays required for completion of this course. (Details below.)

**ASSESSMENTS/EVALUATIONS:**

There will be four essays required for completion of this course. The completed essays must be typed and submitted to ICON portal, per the deadline of each assignment, as stipulated in the schedule below. The essays should be between 500—750 words, and ought to reflect the prompt given in class to all students. Essays must contain several reference points to the lectures and/or readings discussed in class. That means the essays should reflect topics raised by the instructor and/or guest lectures, as well as issues discussed in preceding classes. Some students will seek to write personal experiences related to the prompt; others will report the main issues as discussed in class. The idea behind these essays is to allow students to engage in the material. Instead of a multiple-choice quiz, we hope that the essay format will permit students to reflect more fully on the complexity of issues raised. Particularly since this is a class in journalism, students should make every effort to ensure that their essays are error-free, grammatical, with proper syntax. As with journalism, please keep your paragraphs short and to the point. No padding or extraneous words, please.
Deadlines for the four essays are Sunday 11:59 on the below dates:

Essay #1: February 14, 2021  
Essay #2: March 14, 2021  
Essay #3: April 11, 2021  
Essay #4: May 2, 2021

No late assignments will be accepted. Completion of all four essays is required.

GRADING:
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. There is no exacting rubric in grading writing, but the following criteria will convey general standards:

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.

Each of the four essays will constitute 25 percent of students’ final grades. We will aim to post the grades of each essay within one week on the student’s ICON portal. Each of the four essays will receive a maximum of 25 points, thereby creating the following grid for the final grade computed on a 100-point scale.

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If students don’t complete one or more of the required essays, they won’t receive an F for the missing assignment. They will get NO credit for the omitted assignment, or a 0, which will be disastrous for their final grade. In order to complete the class satisfactorily, you will have to complete all four assignments.

If students are distressed about their grades in this course, they are advised to meet with the professor or TA as the semester progresses. Don’t wait till the last week or the last month.
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 six hours per week.

Exceptional work is expected.

OTHER NOTES:

1) SEEK TO ATTEND AND ENGAGE IN EACH CLASS. If you must miss a class because of illness, an emergency, or a University-sanctioned activity, e-mail Courtney prior to the beginning of class. No kidding. Given the circumstances in which we’re all living these days, if you don’t show up, we may worry about you. Your ongoing attendance, engagement, and participation are essential to the course’s success. Fellow students and I will depend on you to bring clarity and enthusiasm to our discussions (and there will be many). Merely showing up for class and delivering the required assignments is not a substitution for active and significant participation. Please use the raised-hand prompt on Zoom to chime in.

Students are responsible for attending class and for contributing to the course’s learning environment. Any absence must uphold the UI policy related to student illness, mandatory religious obligations, unavoidable circumstances, or University authorized activities (https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/attendance-absences). Students may use the CLAS absence form to aid communication with Courtney who will decide if the absence is excused or unexcused. The form is located on ICON within the top banner under "Student Tools" (https://clas.uiowa.edu/sites/default/files/ABSENCE%20EXPLANATION%20FORM2020.pdf).

2) Arrive via Zoom on time. Late arrivals interrupt the class flow and are a discourtesy to other students. Recurrent tardiness is a sign of immaturity, bad planning, personal-transportation issues, lack of preparation (all bad raps for writers, journalists, academics, anyone). Check your Internet connection before it’s time to sign-on. Don’t be late. Please. Be aware of your surroundings, too. Many of you will be sharing an intimate space with strangers; be respectful.

3) Enjoy the experience of the class. You will be surrounded virtually by 65-70 other students seeking to understand a range of fascinating concepts. This is a luxury and a privilege. Don’t take it for granted. Come prepared to engage. Virtual classes via Zoom require more concentration than in-person classes. This can be exhausting, but immensely worthwhile. We will seek to leverage Zoom to our advantage. In a class this large, we will be able to employ Zoom’s features to make the class seem smaller.

4) Discuss your work with the instructor or T.A. Given a couple of days, we will review drafts of articles and multimedia projects. Courtney and I are here to serve you. If you’d like to discuss a career in journalism/writing, or what happens after you graduate, the professor is available during drop-in hours.

5) Plagiarism, or the use of others’ work as one's own, is a violation of university, academic, and journalistic standards. Anyone who plagiarizes will receive a grade of F in the course. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, ask. Copying off the Internet and calling it your own may be tempting, but is ethically wrong. If you do this without attribution, you are courting disaster. 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. All CLAS students or students taking courses offered by CLAS have, in essence, agreed to the College’s Code of Academic Honesty: “I pledge to do my own academic work and to excel to the best of my abilities, upholding the Iowa
**Challenge.** I promise not to lie about my academic work, to cheat, or to steal the words or ideas of others; nor will I help fellow students to violate the Code of Academic Honesty.” Any student committing academic misconduct is reported to the College and placed on disciplinary probation or may be suspended or expelled (CLAS Academic Policies Handbook). Don’t take chances. Ask if in doubt.

6) Students have a responsibility to the rest of the class to help create a classroom environment where everyone learns. Students are expected to follow guidelines set by the School, College, and University. Students are expected to comply with University policies regarding appropriate classroom behavior as outlined in the Code of Student Life.

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

8) 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, as well as onerous repercussions from higher authorities. Don’t risk this.

9) The University of Iowa is committed to providing an educational experience accessible to all students. A student may request academic accommodations for a disability (which include but are not limited to mental health, attention deficit, or learning, vision, physical or health-related conditions). A student seeking academic accommodations should first register with Student Disability Services and then discuss with the Courtney any particular arrangements. Reasonable accommodations are established through an interactive process among the student, instructor/TA, and SDS. See http://sds.studentlife.uiowa.edu/.

10) Students with suggestions or complaints about anything that happens in this course should not hesitate to contact the TA or instructor. 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), or David-Ryfe@uiowa.edu. 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 Journalism 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.

11) CLAS governs the course’s add/drop deadlines, the second-grade-only option, and other related administrative policies. Other colleges may have different policies. CLAS policies may be found here: https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook.

12) 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. All members of the UI community must uphold the UI mission and contribute to a safe environment that enhances learning. Incidents of sexual harassment must be reported immediately. For assistance, please see: https://osmrc.uiowa.edu/.

13) 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. Students must use this address for all communication within UI (Operations Manual, III.15.2).

14) Although this is an online class, the following advisory is intended for students enrolled in any UI F2F classes:
Students must follow policies and procedures, which they have agreed to regarding the Steps Forward for Spring 2021 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. All students are required to wear a face cover when in a UI building, including a classroom. In addition, the density of seats in classrooms has been reduced. In some instances, this will allow six feet or more of distance while other cases, it may be less. Regardless, wearing face coverings and maintaining as much distance as is possible are vital to slowing the spread of COVID-19. In the event that a student disrupts the classroom environment through their failure to comply with the reasonable directive of an instructor or the University, the instructor has the authority to ask that the student immediately leave the space for the remainder of the class period. Additionally, the instructor is asked to report the incident to the Office of Student Accountability for the possibility of additional follow-up. Students who need a temporary alternative learning arrangement related to COVID-19 expectations should contact Student Disability Services (https://sds.studentlife.uiowa.edu/fall-2020/covid-19-temporary-learning-arrangements/; 335-1462).

The Iowa Dozen

Students in the School of Journalism 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

We are anticipating many amazing guest speakers. Invitations have gone out to correspondents at CNN and National Public Radio, the front-page editor at Huffington Post, a University DEI expert, and on-air talent for the NFL. But given the nature of news, we can’t guarantee when, or even if, they will be able to join our discussions. Details as we progress through the semester.
Note on trigger warnings: We will be discussing several volatile and emotional issues this semester. Graphic images will be shown. The professor will endeavor to offer advance notice of such discussions, but students are advised that issues may come up that may be upsetting to students. Class participants are urged to discuss any possible trigger issues with the professor/TA before or during the classes. All such discussions will be kept confidential.

Week No. 1
Monday and Wednesday, January 25 / January 27, 2021
— Introduction; course overview; expectations; assignments; grading.
— George Orwell poster
— Excerpt from Orwell's 1984
— What exactly is news? How is it different from information?

Week No. 2
Monday and Wednesday, February 1 / February 3, 2021
— Course shakedown
— Will Durant quote
— Case study: 7 (The Media’s Foul Ball)
— Institutional nature of news coverage.
— Paper-based newspapers vs. the Internet: Examples of the possible:
  • Tobacco Cutting Contest
    http://vimeo.com/6835871

Week No. 3
Monday and Wednesday, February 8 / February 10, 2021
— ISBA T-Shirt Saga.
— Offensive.
— Who’s offending whom?
— NYT Op-Docs
  • StoryCorps
    http://storycorps.org/listen/monique-ferrer/
    http://storycorps.org/listen/james-sargent-and-his-brother-don/

PROMPT TO BE GIVEN FOR FIRST ASSESSMENT. THAT ESSAY DUE IN ICON ASSIGNMENTS PORTAL BY 11:59 P.M. SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2021.

Week No. 4
Monday and Wednesday, February 15 / February 17, 2021
Guest Speaker: Kimmi Chex, NFL Productions Analyst
— Joni Ernst, Iowa Values.
We look at an amazing clip from HBO’s Newsroom:
Week No. 5
Monday and Wednesday, February 22 / February 24, 2021
Guest Speaker: Brianna Marcelo, UI Director, Diversity Resources and Strategic Initiatives
— Case studies: 20, 22.
— Liquor Store Robbery
— UI Crime Alert

Week No. 6
Monday and Wednesday, March 1 / March 3, 2021
Guest Speaker: Wayne Drash, Managing Editor, Georgia Public Broadcasting
— Case studies: 25, 26.
— Good Times Gals
— Good Times Gals Lede Exercise
— Conflict of Interest policies, at the Sacramento Bee and Atlantic.
— 48 Things Women Hear that Men Don’t: https://vimeo.com/153712812

Week No. 7
Monday and Wednesday, March 8 / March 10, 2021
— Postville: “Big-boned and handsome”
— Tomahawk Chop
— IC Massage
— Police Operation Backpage
— Prostitution Ring
— Whatever happened to "Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable?"

SECOND ESSAY DUE IN ICON ASSIGNMENTS PORTAL BY 11:59 p.m. SUNDAY, MARCH 14, 2021.

Week No. 8
Monday and Wednesday, March 15 / March 17, 2021
Guest Speaker: Ed Lavandera, CNN Southwest Bureau Chief
— A brief look at The Oxford Project:
— https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lwUA8jZFlg

Week No. 9
Monday and Wednesday, March 22 / March 24, 2021
— Dancer Falls exercise
— NYT Op-Docs

Week No. 10
Monday and Wednesday, March 29 / March 31, 2021
Guest Speaker: Terry Collins, Front Page Editor, Huffington Post
— Jimmy’s World
— Jimmy’s World Edited
Week No. 11
Monday and Wednesday, April 5 / April 7, 2021
Guest speaker: Wayne Drehs, former ESPN Senior Writer
— Valentines
THIRD ESSAY DUE IN ICON ASSIGNMENTS PORTAL BY 11:59 p.m. SUNDAY, APRIL 11, 2021.

Week No. 12
Monday, April 12, 2021
Guest Speaker: Desi Gutierrez, Speech Pathology Student
No class on Wednesday, April 14, 2021 for an observed instructional break

Week No. 13
Monday and Wednesday, April 19 / April 21, 2021
— @Here for the Journalism
— Falluja NYT Photo
— Koreans Kill Infiltrators
— Vinicius de Moraes
— Photos or Cereal Spitters
— The Wheaties Test.

Week No. 14
Monday and Wednesday, April 26 / April 28
— Monetizing the web. How?
— How to attract new customers. How to create a next generation of paying customers.
The paywall.

FOURTH ESSAY DUE IN ICON ASSIGNMENTS PORTAL BY 11:59 P.M., MAY 2, 2021.

Week No. 15
Monday and Wednesday, May 3 / May 5, 2021
— 7 Wonders
— You be the Judge
Wrap-up: Items All University of Iowa Students Need to Know

The above is an approximation. This is a course in news as it develops. We will adjust our purview as the semester progresses.