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

JMC:2700:0001  
Spring, 2020  
School of Journalism and Mass Communication  
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences  
The University of Iowa

**PROFESSOR:** Stephen G. Bloom

**TEACHING ASSISTANT:** Emily Shearer

**PROFESSOR’S OFFICE AND DROP-IN HOURS:** Adler Journalism Building (AJB), Room W-313; Tuesdays 1:30 — 4:30 p.m., or by appointment.

**E-MAILS:** stephen-g-bloom@uiowa.edu; emily-shearer@uiowa.edu

**T.A.’s OFFICE AND HOURS:** AJB, Room E-331; Monday & Wednesday 2 p.m. — 3 p.m., or by appointment.

**CLASS LOCATIONS AND TIMES:** Monday and Wednesday, 3:30 – 4:45 p.m., 109 English-Philosophy Building (EPB).

**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 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 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.

This syllabus gives a general outline of what to expect. 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, all speaking the same language. If there are terms or concepts still unfamiliar to you, please ask me to explain. There are no stupid questions. If you don’t know the term or concept I’m talking about, chances are very good that other students won’t know, either. So, please speak up!

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

The course is really two classes wrapped into one: a lecture and a seminar. The syllabus provides an attempt of an outline; but much of 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 a scaffold upon which to base a series of important elements/issues students ought to learn. We may diverge from it considerably. We’ll see how the semester unfolds.

Fasten your seatbelts. We will go where the news takes us. This semester ought to take us to a lot of wild and wooly places. We’ll discuss how the Government and the Press clash. We’ll take on fake news stories. We’ll follow how press coverage can be slanted, and how government spokespersons (and some reporters) are often ministers of propaganda. In discussing these issues, we will address them in an engaging, non-partisan manner. Whether you support President Trump or not, whether you’re a Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, Green Party member, Independent, or apathetic political non-believer, we’ll engage in fiercely analyzing press performance as it relates to fundamental issues of democracy.

The overarching emphasis will be American journalism, and as such, we’ll spend time looking at various 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 ethical 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 many of your preconceived notions of media and what our expectations ought to be.

We’ll 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, instantly online, or on television 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 is it?
Are Tweets from the President news? Are government assertions that are inaccurate and untruthful news? When should the media critically interpret and when shall 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 during the semester.

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 see in the most pleasant and advantageous of lights. In almost all ways, the media is complicit in such meaningless reporting.

Example: When Beyoncé announces she’s expecting, it’s the lead story in thousands of magazines, blogs, newspapers, TV shows. It’s what Beyoncé’s people want, what millions of her fans seem to crave, what media bean counters (anyone know what this phrase means?) live for. Everyone makes out nicely, thank you. But is Beyoncé’s pregnancy 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, what gets printed, broadcast or blogged today is often exactly what public-relations practitioners—including the government—have packaged for public consumption. An essential filter—journalists—have often been shown the door. How can we make informed decisions (the upcoming Iowa Caucus, for example) 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. For the next semester, you will be media critics. You will have license to be opinionated. You will be prompted to be lively and assertive. I’ll be the facilitator; students will carry forth the discussion.

In fact, a maximum of 10 points can be added to your final grade based on meaningful class participation.

Think critically. Think concretely (and abstractly) about how American journalism could be reconfigured so the public might become better informed, educated, 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 to better serve all of us.

There is no textbook, although we will follow a protocol of discussing case studies of ethical issues. There are multiple case studies posted on ICON we will discuss; please read all case studies per their insertion in the syllabus. I suggest you print out each case study and keep it in a binder to help organize your study. Bring the case studies to class so you will be able to refer to them. You will need to be prepared to discuss the case studies each Monday, so please be prepared.
On Wednesdays, we are scheduled to have a more far-ranging discussion, based on critiquing media ethical issues that have transpired during the week. As such, we will be looking at coverage of events in the following online newsies: The Iowa City Press-Citizen, Gazette, Des Moines Register, and New York Times. We will not discuss anything from The Daily Iowan.

ASSESSMENTS/EVALUATIONS:
There will be three assessments/evaluations of your knowledge about media ethics/diversity issues and their application in today’s journalism marketplace. These will be 50-question multiple-choice tests. If students prepare by digesting the readings for each class, engage in class every session, take notes, and participate in the ensuing discussion, these assessments/evaluations should provide a strong and accurate correlation of student performance in the course.

Below are the date of those assessments:
1) First Assessment/Evaluation February 19
2) Midterm Assessment/Evaluation April 1
3) Optional Extra Credit Assignment* April 15
4) Third Assessment/Evaluation May 6

Below is a breakdown of the components that make up students’ final grades. Each assessment will be 50 questions. Grades will be based on a total of 160 points:
1) First Assessment/Evaluation 50 points
2) Midterm Assessment/Evaluation 50 points
3) Third Assessment/Evaluation 50 points
4) Class participation: 10 points
*Extra Credit Assignment (up to) 20 points

GRADING:
If students are distressed about their grades in this course, please meet with the professor or TA as the semester progresses. (It’s a good idea to meet, even if you’re not distressed about your grades!) Don’t wait till the last week or the last month. The final grade will be based on a maximum of 160 points. Ordinarily, we will follow point scale:

A+ 156 - 160
A 152 - 155
A- 145 - 151
B+ 140 - 144
B 135 - 139
B- 128 - 134
C+ 122 - 127
C 116 - 121
C- 112 - 115
D+ 106- 111
D 99 - 105
D- 92 - 98
F 91 and below

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.
The **Extra Credit Assignment** (ECA) can tremendously boost your grade. Examples of successful assignments are posted on ICON, and can be viewed in the publication, *NewsJump*. The requirements for the ECA are to interview at least two professional journalists about a story they have produced during the fall term. These interviews may be conducted via email, in person, or over the phone. Students must first identify a story that raises provocative issues in its content or approach, and then pitch their idea directly to me or Emily Shearer, the course’s T.A. With an approval from either the professor or T.A., students will pose a series of questions to the journalist, which may include issues such as the genesis of the article under review, the journalists’ reporting techniques, and whether there were any ethical considerations posed before publication. The ECA should be between 1,000 and 1,500 words. Students are advised to discuss with the professor or TA during the research and execution of the ECA. Merely handing in the ECA is no guarantee that any points will be earned by the student; but executed with precision and insight, the ECA can earn a student a maximum of 20 extra points (within the grid of 160 possible points) in the course.

In computing students’ final grades, the professor/T.A. retains the absolute right of adding or subtracting points to accurately reflect student performances.

**OTHER NOTES:**

1) **ATTENDANCE IS MANDATORY. IT IS NOT OPTIONAL. YOU MUST ATTEND EACH CLASS. ROLL WILL BE TAKEN.** You don’t get points for attending; but you will lose points if you miss class. **If you miss (without a compelling reason, as outlined to Emily) more than three classes during the semester, each additional absence will be reflected in a loss of five points from your final grade.**

Class attendance means that you remain in the class throughout the class period, i.e., through 4:45 p.m. Please don’t leave early; that is a disservice to you, the T.A., professor, and fellow class members. Why would you want to miss anything? This course firmly upholds the UI policy related to student illness, mandatory religious obligations, including Holy Day obligations, unavoidable circumstances, or University authorized activities ([https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/attendance-absences](https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/attendance-absences)). Students may use this absence form to aid communication; the T.A. will decide if the absence whether the absence is excused or unexcused: ([https://clas.uiowa.edu/sites/default/files/ABSENCE%20EXPLANATION%20FORM2020.pdf](https://clas.uiowa.edu/sites/default/files/ABSENCE%20EXPLANATION%20FORM2020.pdf)

2) The class will be run in part as a large seminar, and as such, your ongoing **engagement** and **participation** will be vital to your success. Fellow students and I will depend on you to bring clarity and enthusiasm to our discussions. Merely showing up for class is not a substitution for active and significant participation. As described above, you will be rewarded a maximum of 10 points for engaging and participating in a meaningful way. If this poses any sort of problem, students are encouraged to meet with the professor or T.A. to discuss the material.

3) **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.

4) **Turn off your cell phone and laptop during class.** Note taking must be done by hand. No text messaging, checking your email, surfing the web. **If you engage in any of these abominations, you will be asked to leave on the spot. Really.**
5) Dress appropriately. No pajamas (sorry to mention this, but it has happened). I’d suggest removing your hat. Treat the class with respect, as you would a job. This is your job for the next 15 weeks.

6) 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, braid it, or go through it for split ends.

7) Discuss questions with the professor or T.A. We are here to serve you. If you’d like to talk about the readings, about a career in journalism/writing, or what happens after you graduate, we would very much welcome a visit.

8) 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. 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 classes 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).

9) 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.

10) If students want to publish their work (i.e., the extra-credit assignment), do so after the piece is submitted for this class. That assignment 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.

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

12) Students with suggestions or complaints about anything that happens in this course should not hesitate to contact the professor or T.A. 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.

13) 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.

14) 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.
15) In severe weather, class members should seek shelter in the basement of EPB. For more information on Hawk Alert and the siren warning system, visit the Department of Public Safety website.

16) Please note the following SJMC sites and links:
   - FACEBOOK: https://www.facebook.com/UISJMC/
   - INSTAGRAM: https://www.instagram.com/uiowa_sjmc/
   - TWITTER: https://twitter.com/UIOWA_SJMC
   - LINKEDIN: https://www.linkedin.com/school/19128785

*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**

**Week No. 1**
Wednesday, January 22, 2020
Introduction; course overview; expectations; assignments; grading.
What exactly is *news*? How is it different from *information*?

**Week No. 2**
Monday and Wednesday, January 27 - 29, 2020
Course shakedown. Description of terms.
Case studies: 6, 7, 9.
Institutional nature of news coverage.
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
— 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: “New York calling!”
**Week No. 3**  
Monday and Wednesday, February 3 - 5, 2020  
Case studies: 10, 13.  
Bloom’s Cannery Connection.  
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 an impoverished media menu.  
A look at StoryCorps:  
— A brief look at The Oxford Project:  
— [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lwUA8jZFIg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lwUA8jZFIg)

**Week No. 4**  
Monday and Wednesday, February 10 - 12, 2020  
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*:  
— [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huFh760p-MA&noredirect=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huFh760p-MA&noredirect=1)  
Herman Cain and President Trump:  
— [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 press looks at Iowa.

**Week No. 5**  
Monday and Wednesday, February 17 – 19, 2020  
Case studies: 19, 20, 22.  
**First Assessment/Evaluation**

**Week No. 6**  
Monday and Wednesday, February 24 – February 26, 2020  
Case studies: 24, 25, 26.  
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?”  
Bloom’s Cruise story.

**Week No. 7**  
Monday and Wednesday, March 2 – 4, 2020  
Case studies: 27.  
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.

**Week No. 8**  
Monday and Wednesday, March 7– 9, 2020  
Case studies: 36, 37.  
The Wheaties Test.  
How we cover death. Obituaries vs. death notices.  
Julian Assange, Wikileaks, the Casualty of war:  

**Spring Break**

**Week No. 9**  
Monday and Wednesday, March 23 – 25, 2020  
NYT Op-Docs  

**Week No. 10**  
Monday and Wednesday, March 30 – April 1, 2020  
Case studies: 48.  
Ethics and coverage of news. Paying for coverage.  
Janet Cooke.  
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.  
**Midterm Assessment /Evaluation**

**Week No. 11**  
Monday and Wednesday, April 6 - 8, 2020  
— Open

**Week No. 12**  
Monday and Wednesday, April 13 – 15, 2020  
**Optional Extra Credit Assignment due**  
Monetizing the web. How.  

**Week No. 13**  
Monday and Wednesday, April 20 – 22, 2020  
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?

**Week No. 14**  
Monday and Wednesday, April 27 – 29, 2020
Catch-up; review; the news of tomorrow.
Items All University of Iowa Students Need To Know
Where you fit in.

**Week No 15**
Monday and Wednesday, May 4 – 6
**Third Assessment Review/Evaluation**

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