

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

DIGITAL MEDIA ETHICS RTV 4930 Spring 2014

Syllabus Outline

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Objectives: Ethics is very big right now - professional ethics, business ethics, medical ethics and of course media ethics. So is the online world. The aim of this course is to get students thinking about standards and social responsibilities in online communication. This applies to journalism, public relations, broadcast, website provision, 'social media' and marketing. What is proper and acceptable behaviour regarding, for example, intrusion into people's private lives? The phone hacking scandal of 2011 brought these issues into sharp focus on both sides of the Atlantic, as more recently has the Twitter spat between singers Miley Cyrus and Sinead O'Connor. Another question is the extent of permissible interference with people's financial affairs. Just because digital gives a vast breadth of information about individuals, should and could it be used? How does a media professional present themselves in a blog or on Twitter? In the open world of the internet, still evolving and largely unregulated, what is the right thing to do?

This course involves case studies, discussion, and deliberation, as well as examining fundamentals of ethical thought. Moral philosophy is a basis for the exploration of issues, but also important are developed and developing cultural norms. We'll consider how different standards can apply in different societies or communities. And the overwhelming role that the evolving abilities of technology play in contemporary communication practice will be explored.

Through the classes, via podcasts, slides, and scripts, students will:

- Explore traditional ethical standards, and the different problems today with vast audiences and lack of regulation on the internet
- Discuss and deliberate on appropriate action when an online ethical problem arises

- Identify ethical dilemmas in journalism. and those most common via the internet
- Appreciate ethical challenges for journalists and other sources when posting material
- Explore the differences between visual, audio and written material when posting
- Make and justify decisions about ethical dilemmas

By the end of the semester, they will be expected to have developed these skills:

- Evidence of critical understanding of ethics and their application to journalism and other communications professions
- Understanding of differences between communication in the online and offline environments
- Knowledge and analysis of regulation of journalism/PR/video industries
- Awareness of current codes of behaviour for media professionals, and how these fit in the online environment

COURSE PLAN

Week-by-week (15 sessions). Please note that this is a dynamic subject, and although the ethical background is constant, some sessions might update and change to reflect what is happening in the world – for example the latest Twitter scandal or intrusion into personal social media.

Week 1:

The **structure of cyberspace** – comparison with ‘non-virtual’ world in terms of personal interaction, collective intelligence, social mores. Reminder that many people still are more comfortable with ‘offline’ scenarios and encounters. The rapid evolution of a digital world, and its implications for personal interactions.

2:

Ethics and **practical philosophy** – the Greek tradition, the Asian tradition. Duty ethics and consequentialists. Modern thinkers who have been very influential – Rousseau, Hobbes, Nietzsche, Rawls – and how their thought has been translated into how we behave.

3: **Problems** for ‘broadcast’ media (all platforms): privacy, accuracy, free speech, respect for grief, commercial sensitivity, transparency. This session outlines the major

areas of concern in ethics for digital communicators.

4: Ethics for **journalists**: practical considerations, two-way street with the audience, loss of gatekeeper status (or have they?) Examination of codes such as SPJ, NUJ. Fact v. comment. **Public image** of media professionals. Has the internet changed these, by making conversation more two way? Websites of organizations that ‘watch’ media and PR. Discussion on how codes of practice are being – or should be - revised to take account of online situation.

5: Ethics for **public relations and marketing** officers: trust and credibility – how can this be established in cyberspace? Openness, honesty, loyalty. Potted history of public relations ethics from Ivy Lee at start of 20th century. Crisis-management – what happens when your product turns out to be poisonous? Or your intern tweets a vulgarity?

6: **The problem of privacy.** The online world is ubiquitous, on all the time, everywhere. With the perhaps inadvertent connivance of commercial interests and public authorities, many details on all of us are held online. And then there’s our social media. How does the modern communications professional view individual privacy?

[ASSIGNMENT ONE DUE]

7: **Free speech: everyone has a platform – everyone can broadcast.** How should we be wary of this power, and while respecting the First Amendment, not doing harm to innocent or vulnerable people by allowing extremist opinions to circulate? **Twitter** and texting – can ‘the rules’ apply? Free speech? The brevity with which messages are conveyed is a good discipline, but can lead to misunderstanding and inappropriate truncation. Unconsidered commentary is a bad thing, but is it our right?

8: **Facebook** etc: at what stage are the main social networks? How have they been used for work and play? What is legitimate use of such networks for both news-gathering and marketing? How can we avoid using ‘private’ material on Facebook and other social media, if our peers and competitors are?

9: **Blogging** and its limitations/opportunities, as opposed to the conventional website. Chatrooms, ‘flaming’ and ‘trolling’ - how to deal with. Plagiarism.

10: **Who controls the digital world, anyway?** We consider the roles of ICANN, the ISPs, governments. Is more control undesirable, as the free-internet campaigners claim, or does there need to be regulation against pornographers, terrorists, pedlars of unsafe medicines?

11: **Picture power:** some of the niceties of ethical image use. How close is too close? Children in images.

[ASSIGNMENT TWO DUE]

12: Wikileaks. We consider in detail the case study of Wikileaks, from its innocent beginnings to the storm that blew up over the 250,000 cable release starting in 2010. Is Julian Assange a journalist?

13: ETC – or, Emails/Texts/Cellphones How communication on each of these should be handled, considering both the journalistic and commercial/marketing viewpoints

14: Artificial Intelligence: how bots, automated responses, virtual reality, are changing the scene for communications professionals.

15: Self-regulation the answer? How have entities tasked with making media professionals behave fare in the ‘real world’? Is community pressure great enough? Final overview: the ‘Slow Media’ movement and the future of online usage. Also **REVISION**

[FINAL AND MAJOR ASSIGNMENT DUE by 12 noon, 4/19/14]

Class Conduct and Contact: Class participation takes place online. Lectures, including podcasts and video, will be available on the UF website. Online discussions will be a regular and compulsory feature of the course. Students will be expected to post comments and questions to the e-learning site and keep your eyes and ears open for current events that may relate to class discussions. The lecturer will be available by email outside of discussion times on a specified day of the week.

Readings: The required text for the course is *Digital Media Ethics*, by Charles Ess. The second edition is dated November 2013, and publisher is Polity.

Another useful book is *Media Ethics - Key Principles for Responsible Practice*, by Patrick Lee Plaisance (2010). Students should also have read the Society for Professional Journalists code. A reading list will be made available. Although the reading is not compulsory, it is recommended.

And bookmark these websites: www.cjr.org, <http://pewresearch.org/> They have regular material on ethical and related issues, and the lecturer will make specific recommendations for articles.

Other readings/viewings will be recommended as we go along. Articles and academic papers that relate to particular sub-themes will be posted in the e-learning area.

Discussion posts: Each student will be expected to post a comment or question to the e-learning Discussion site in relation to at least six threads over the course of the semester. Your comments and questions will be graded based on the extent to which they contribute to or advance the discussion. So for each thread on which you post, you’ll get minimal points if your post(s) merely re-state(s) what someone else already has said.

Tests/Assignments:

There will be two smaller assignments, during semester, and one major presentation at the end. The final deadline is April 19, 2014.

You will also receive points for contribution to online discussions and for posting to the e-learning site. As this is a remote course, it is more important than ever to keep people involved when we cannot see them. On the plus side, you can think more carefully about what you want to contribute than is possible in the cut and thrust of class discussion!
