# THE INNOVATORS SERIES

**Mark Little, Storyful**

## A CONVERSATION ON SOCIAL JOURNALISM ETHICS AND THE UF CJC CURRICULUM

### Participants

Mark Little, *CEO and Founder, Storyful*
Clay Calvert, *Professor, Journalism Department*
Johanna Cleary, *Associate Professor, Telecommunication Department*
Steve Johnson, *Adjunct Lecturer, Journalism Department*
Sri Kalyanaraman, *Associate Professor, Journalism Department*
Michael Leslie, *Associate Professor, Telecommunication Department*
Mindy McAdams, *Professor, Journalism Department*
Diane McFarlin, *Dean, College of Journalism and Communications*
Cynthia Morton, *Associate Professor, Advertising Department*
Ron Rodgers, *Associate Professor, Journalism Department*
Ted Spiker, *Associate Professor, Journalism Department*
Kim Walsh-Childers, *Professor, Journalism Department*
Kay Tappan, Lecturer, *Public Relations Department*

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications launched its "Innovators" series by hosting Storyful founder and CEO Mark Little on September 18-19, 2014. Mark participated in a series of conversations with faculty, students and the general public related to social journalism ethics.

This report focuses on two conversations with 12 faculty members over two days examining questions about how to effectively teach social journalism ethics in a vibrant and inclusive way.

The first discussion session featured a detailed discussion about the topics we should be covering related to social media ethics. We divided those topics into five major categories: verification issues, contributor credits, safety considerations, cultural considerations, and legal considerations. (See Table 1.)

The second discussion followed up by asking how we could most effectively convey those concepts to students, i.e. one course focusing on social journalism ethics, addition of the topics to the existing journalism and telecommunications ethics classes, a series of one-hour credit courses, modules for existing skills courses, etc.

A series of ideas was developed and is detailed at the end of this report. They ranged from creating a "grand rounds" structure to discuss ethical issues that arise in the course of covering news, to an ongoing required series of seminars, to one or more dedicated social journalism classes, to an ongoing online ethics discussion with prizes attached.

*Notes outlined below from the two discussion sessions are summations of key points and not verbatim transcripts.*

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**DISCUSSION 1**
**SEPTEMBER 18, 2014**

**Focus:** What are the social journalism ethics topics we should be teaching?

**Participants:** Mark Little, Johanna Cleary, Sri Kalyanaraman, Michael Leslie, Mindy McAdams, Cynthia Morton, Ron Rodgers, Ted Spiker

### Michael Leslie

Interested in developing ethical leadership within the college.

### Ron Rodgers

Interested in the evolution of norms in journalism and how social media impacts them.

### Diane McFarlin

Interested in experimentation within the program and what we can take away for the future.

### Cynthia Morton

Interested in where advertising fits in with the ethical discussion (especially social media, digital space and clients).

### Sri Kalyanaraman

Interested in the psychological aspect of ethics and the media strategy of messages.

### Ted Spiker

Interested in how social media impacts the high profile cases (i.e. the NFL).

### Johanna Cleary

Interested in the development of standards and mores for social journalism at a pivotal time that mirrors the 1940s and the development of broadcast journalism ethics.

### Mark Little

Storyful is the first social media news agency. Grew out of seeing what happened by

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utilizing eye witnesses that are civilians, who provide powerful images. How can we help journalists survive? This is, in fact, the golden age even though we are losing the monopoly on news.

When I covered wars, we had to spend a lot of money to bring the war to people. There are so many people on the ground at news events. However, only a few people can sort the massive amount of information into meaningful stories.

I woke up to the fact that the future isn't newspapers, it's storytelling. I've been able to test out these practices over 25 years.

Here is what I see as areas of concentration:
News gathering – The rules of the game have changed. We are not asking the audience to sit around waiting for the news. That's the ethical challenge: to verify the information and gain trust.

Credit & compensation – For example, the Hudson River plane video. These are sometimes iconic images, how do you credit them?

Ethics of safety – We are using a 24-year-old graduate in Syria – is that ethical? Do we bear responsibility for their safety? Storm pictures are a good example. If the Coast Guard tells the media not to encourage people to send it photos in a dangerous situation. Is there a new license we need to create for this type of content?

Archiving – This is a revolutionary opportunity for archives. All the defining videos from Iran are lost because of YouTube and political campaigns censoring them. There's no one out there preserving this historical archive.

Commercial aspect of advertising, PR and marketing – We all need a business model. The dirty secret is that we forget that there isn't a business model in journalism. Native advertising has come along and distorted the audience's view. Do we train journalists to specially work for brands? There is an ethical challenge about how we develop new skills for journalism that will curate and create content that is in step with a brand's outlook. (Red Bull and extreme sports for example.) Previously you needed a publisher to do that.

**Sri Kalyanaraman**

Clarification on authority mentioned earlier?

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### Mark Little

We always get closer to events when we look for information from eyewitnesses. Social media allows us to get close to the scene. All the audience wants to know is if it's someone they can trust, not necessarily caring about the name attached to it. There's nothing so pointless as a reporter. You don't necessarily need to be on the ground. If you saw John Oliver and his video on climate change, it's the greatest critique on false equivalence.

### Ron Rodgers

I'm interested in the powers of narrative journalism – completely avoiding anyone with a press release.

### Mark Little

When I was sent to cover a crime, I would go in the pub and find the person that is the reliable one with information. Fast forward: this is now Twitter. We know we can find these people quicker. There's always somebody closer to the story. It's different from how the network can run it and sometimes miss the content. No institutional way of saying "Let's talk to the people who filmed this video of that terrible storm."

### Mindy McAdams

Can you consider the motivations of the people who post false information?

### Mark Little

People like to think they can hoodwink national news - turn on their TVs and see that's what they have done. Another more dangerous and more sinister group is state-sponsored activists - a bunch of bloggers that get a stipend from the government to spread propaganda in countries like Iran, Egypt. We've seen situations where pro-Russians bloggers will take down notices so the iconic video or image is lost. There's never been a fact-checking machine. In Rwanda, radio falsified reports that helped fuel the massacres. We see instant rumor mongering can have a huge effect on what's happening on the ground. We are in an arm's race between good and bad. [Cites the Jimmy Kimmel/fire/twerking video example.]

A lot of journalists think it's okay to just report on what's on the internet and it presents ethical challenges.

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**Mark Little**

One recent study of UGC showed only 16% of content used from eyewitnesses was credited.  Newsgathering challenges are the best place to start.

**Johanna Cleary**

We visited with the BBC Persian news desk online division during a study abroad trip. They were talking about the 2009 Iranian protests videos and that people wanted to contribute video of the protests, but the desk had to talk them down because they were afraid if they put out everything the contributors gave them, it could place these contributors at risk for being killed.

**Mark Little**

We have a team of 75 people around the world, they are watching out for videos. If there is a spike in messages, we know people are talking about someone. We then ask for a clearance, can this be used by all our news networks? There is an ethical point of confidential and anonymity. Also there is the issue of people making money off videos.

A client put up a video of a woman going to the end of the pier in a storm with her dog and almost got swept away. It backfired. Could it have been defamatory and libelous? Was it suggesting this women was negligent?

**Cynthia Morton**

Back to authenticity and the way you frame a story. Because I talked to this person and shot the story here, there is an implied credibility I'm lending. From the student's standpoint, from a news consumer, it stops there because they know where the story is coming from.

**Mark Little**

We work with algorithms. If I were to build a list for sports, there is a list of a few people that we immediately follow. It allows us to identify who were missing and whom the crowd trusts. It's a great tool, especially if a journalist is new to the area or issue.  Nowadays our journalists are following up with internet social media leads. Our journalists will engage with the people in the community to get the information to help them forensically find where the leads are coming from. Training them, for example, to show a landmark in the video to

fact check location. [Storyful]  tends to find people that are not traditional. They have very diverse backgrounds.

Twitter conversations are a lot like watching an organic entity. We have a program that captures chatter around keywords. It takes hashtags then crosses them with GPS technology and can pull out all the content. There is a forensic aspect to this. If you map content with the content you have, it's really easy to track a storm with the tweets and videos as it moves along the coast. We need to have coders in the newsroom to bring that 3D news.

### Ted Spiker

I wanted to ask about the false information surrounding the Boston bombings?

### Mark Little

I don't think these ethical challenges were new. It was good old-fashioned negligence. In the age of social media, the scoops are often going to be wrong while trying to get the story first. Still have scoops in NSA and situations like that but not with breaking news.  On Boston, a lesson we can learn is: "Don't be stupid."

### Mindy McAdams

There is no need to be first on breaking news. BuzzFeed would say the opposite. Their practice is to get the tidbit out first and then update it as the news breaks. Want to be first so they will get the most shares. Can you address that?

### Mark Little

By breaking away from the dictatorship of being first and live on air, we'll get better information. It's such a horrible way to be a journalist. By liberating good reporters from that BS journalism, you'll free them up to get better information. In the first 15 or 20 minutes, it's right and first (reactors) and then a second group that add context (explainers). BuzzFeed has done great things but I would not study their model and practices.

### Ron Rodgers

The "Put it out there and we'll fix it later" attitude.

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## Mark Little, Storyful

### Johanna Cleary

We've got a few minutes left. When we resume our conversation tomorrow, are we talking about one class? How do we effectively make this material come alive?

### Mark Little

The second part is culture. We don't need to understand the technology to use it. We wouldn't put a 17-year-old on camera on TV but if he has that iconic image or video do we use it? All the content coming out of a recent helicopter crash in Glasgow was amazing but what can we take and use? The practical reality is that we can't use stuff from Ukrainian people because of sanctions.

By speaking with ISIS, am I breaking protocol? Am I doing a disservice to my audience? Using rights to censor: how do we work with that on the ground? So many of these issues are coming to light because of this. It's more about the culture of journalism versus newsgathering techniques.

### Cynthia Morton

Ethics of the copycat effect? How many times do they continue showing an incident in the 24-hour news cycle? There's a corporate bottom line here, as well as ratings, that is driving this. How does this effect future training?

### Mark Little

We teach our own journalists who are out there talking all the time, you have to understand they can't separate BS when they are giving out unverified reports. That's what I'm talking about: the cultural revolution.

I would challenge you and say maybe they're more socialized than we are. Lack of authenticity is easy to spot for this generation. 140 characters can say a lot – we need to help this generation express themselves to be storytellers.

### Ron Rodgers

We are at a critical junction. I never thought "objectivity" was a very descriptive term. This is a time to talk about news ethics and toss this term to the side and find new ways.

### Mark Little

Transparency isn't completely right but it's close. We all vote, have biases and views and that's okay – as long as we can see where those biases and views took over, it's a good thing.

No one is doing this: we're having a conversation that has not taken place somewhere else.

***Notes submitted by Victoria Colson***

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# THE INNOVATORS SERIES

**Mark Little, Storyful**

**DISCUSSION 2**
**SEPTEMBER 19, 2014**

**Focus:** How do we effectively teach social journalism ethics?

**Participants:** Mark Little, Clay Calvert, Johanna Cleary, Mindy McAdams, Kim Walsh-Childers, Ron Rodgers, Ted Spiker, Kay Tappan

## Mark Little

Storyful is interested in a report released this summer by the Tow Center looking at ethics issues; and we are supporting the concept of an industry-wide ombudsman to address social journalism ethics.

I was excited by yesterday's student session focused on developing a set of UGC guidelines for the INC. The students looked at issues surrounding: 1) news gathering, 2) engagement with social media users, and 3) cultural considerations.

The students suggested setting up a social media assignment desk in the INC that is focused on UGC, designed much like a traditional news desk. They suggested that it be based on the idea that social journalists are first responders.
For example, the assignment desk could work from the premise that "A storm has hit a town. I can't get there, but I want to talk to people. What do I do?"

## Mindy McAdams

She noted that she essentially worked that desk last night during the coverage of the killings of seven people in Bell, Florida. She saw no local citizens tweet anything that was not a link to the rumors being published by local media stations. The INC live tweeted during the feed of the press conference as it happened, thanks to the CBS station.

Discovery. Verification. Considerations for how you deliver the information.

We need to consider how do we develop a system so that they are making the same decisions today that they are making tomorrow, i.e. consider the categorical imperative and developing newsroom protocols.

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**Mark Little, Storyful**

### Mark Little

Ordinary people are creating the news. New things come up that we've never thought about before. Storyful has created a "Ten Commandments" for ethical use of user-generated content.

### Ron Rodgers

This conversation has inspired him to change a key part of his editing class assignment to keep a daily log of what is happening. Now he is also going to ask the students to note legal and ethical issues that come up. This can be the basis for a debriefing later.

### Mark Little

Storyful also likes reporters to know definitions of the following: Fair use. Transformative use. Copyright. Creative Commons. (Just like in the past, when journalists could define libel).

### Clay Calvert

It is important to consider those times when the picture is the story and that is driving the news value decisions. We need to consider fair use questions and manipulation of images. It is also important to understand the implications of copyright. For example, what are YouTube's terms of use? (YouTube doesn't even understand them).

For example, the Hudson River plane crash image was exploited in perpetuity. Is there some way to turn off or on monetization? Many videos are not loaded by the copyright holder, but the original uploader gets the credit.

Does linking suffice for attribution? What happens if they take down the link?

There is a debate about embeds that is important.

Law enforcement is often releasing photos that they want to be public; does that make it ok to share?

### Johanna Cleary

How do we best convey this material to students? Should it be an online class? An on-site class? Should it be a class, several classes? Perhaps modules for a variety of existing skills

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classes?

[We currently offer an online class called "Communication Ethics in the Digital Age" that covers a range of issues related to social media.]

**Ted Spiker**

We could experiment with formats that might work. Maybe it's a class, maybe dropped into existing classes. Maybe a series of sessions that lead to one-credit courses.

**Kim Walsh-Childers**

What if we created a platform for a weekly or monthly gathering, like "grand rounds" in a teaching hospital? We could have a dedicated discussant, either faculty or student. Everyone working in the INC that semester is expected to show up. It could focus on news ethics issues in the INC or other news issues if the INC is too slow.

**Clay Calvert**

We could call it "Real Time Ethics." Maybe we would hold sessions three times a semester and require the students to attend 2 out of 3 sessions.

**Steve Johnson**

Similar to the program he is enrolled in in the Business College, they could establish a point system whereby we require the students attend "x number of workshops, etc (guest speakers, premiere workshop, discussions)" each semester.

**Kim Walsh-Childers**

We could also consider something like "Three weeks out from the [Bell] shooting, bringing in the actual people who were affected (relatives, sheriff, etc)." We need to include story stakeholders more often. Get creative. People could Skype in; journalists from other newsrooms could Skype in as guest speakers.

Among those classes that should be included are Radio 1, TV 1 and TV2 for Telecom, Editing and Reporting for JOU; parts of these classes require working in the INC for credit. We could also include the Student Experience group who work in the INC each semester.

Require students to get x amount of points with each activity accruing a point. This keeps

our curriculum fresh without having to constantly update each course.

We could consider creating a "case competition" series in which students routinely debate ethical issues.

### Mindy McAdams

For example, once a month there's an ethical problem that we put on a  Facebook page. You post "here's the ethical challenge," then students have to reply. This a way of putting ethics in front of them once a month. Include timeframe. Have a panel of, perhaps, three judges (industry experts, etc, maybe advisory council).  The strongest entries would be selected and publicized. We could have monthly prizes with a larger annual grand prize.

We could make it into an ongoing undergraduate ethics essay competition. We could publish a book out of it with a cash prize for the winner. [Perhaps we could build on the undergraduate ethics competition sponsored by the Elie Wiesel Foundation at http://www.eliewieselfoundation.org/CM_Images/000/10/EP%20Student%20 Guidelines%202015.pdf

There was also discussion of the Carol Burnett prize for journalism ethics research sponsored through AEJMC.

***Notes submitted by Kay Tappan***

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### RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Consider creating a Social Journalism Ethics course that could be offered as an elective. This might not be offered every semester, but would be a regular part of our curriculum.

Consider including the topics specified in Table 1 in the Social Journalism Ethics course.

Consider creating modules that would be appropriate for existing skills classes. For example, Sight, Sound and Motion could include a lecture related to manipulating social media images.

Consider creating a "grand rounds" structure for discussing ethical issues related to stories covered in the INC. Based on a tradition used in teaching hospitals, this would be a regularly scheduled, ongoing process by which students and news managers would deconstruct ethical challenges encountered in the course of covering stories. There would be some flexibility for the topics covered and efforts would be made to bring in outside issues and with guests when appropriate.

Consider creating a required series of seminars that would focus on ethics topics. They could include sessions with speakers from The Innovators series, "grand rounds" discussions, and other activities that would focus on ethics. Students in relevant classes (i.e. Radio 1, TV1 and TV2, Reporting, Editing, etc.) would be required to attend a specified number of events each semester. Attendance at events would help the student accrue the points needed to receive course credit.

Consider creating an online competition focusing on debating ethics issues. Create a prize structure to recognize the monthly winners and award a grand prize for the year. [Prizes for the Elie Wiesel Foundation awards are $500-5,000 annually.]

*Report submitted by Johanna Cleary, September 20, 2014*

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