**Media Ethics Notes** – Chapter 1

*Chapter Goals…*

- Recognize need for professional ethics in journalism
- Work through model of ethical decision making
- Identify/use the 5 philosophical principles applicable to mass communication situations

*Making Ethical Decisions*

Scenario #1 (brief) – you work for PR firm; firm discovers successful herbal medicine in Europe, and plans to sell it in US by a profitable fee generating promotion; plans to use third parties to help spread word about herbal products; you do research, discovering the medicine’s combining with over-the-counter drug causes addiction; boss says to continue strategy without informing third-parties (public). What to do?

Scenario #2 (brief) – You’re spokesperson for metropolitan police force, specializing in PR; 3 weeks into a sniper spree that results in 10 victims, there’s a break; suspects determined to drive a blue Chevy Caprice w/ New Jersey plates, however this information release would result in public helping police spot car; also gives suspects a chance to switch cars; What to do? If local media gets word before a decision’s made, would you verify or deny it?

Scenario #3 (brief) – You’re producer for nightly newscast; poor ratings result in lowest salaries in market; your station forms an investigative team, “I-Team,” in hopes of gaining more market share; team captures exclusive story about having staked out a local airport, discovering security breaches that allow terrorists to sneak into passenger planes; running story would expose loopholes, causing responsible party to close them; story could give important info. to potential terrorists who may try other airports; however the story would give you an investigative boost. What to do?

Scenario #4 (brief) – You’re promotions director for local TV station, sponsoring large Christmas drive for all charities helping the needy in your community; station only provides large gift to start campaign; airs feature story during nights succeeding Thanksgiving, on different charities receiving monies from drive; station outsources stories to local PR firm that does vid news releases; week later get a call about food bank charity vid being staged; you investigate other charities profiled by PR agency, detecting similar patterns of employees posing as “clients;” none wants to go on record, fearing not getting promised charity funds. What to do?

**Dilemma of Dilemmas**

Dilemma – present ethical problem with no single “right” answer, even though final decision’s holds tons of ethical ramifications.

Business of Ethics? – resolving dilemmas

Aid of theory – helps back up your final decision

Where do answers come from? – from within you, but informed by others’ experience, findings, etc. Benefit from another’s insight
Quandary Ethics – feeling that no best choice is available; everyone’s choice is equally valid

Ethics codes are guidelines, however not fullproof.

Ethics, through practice/consistency in thinking about it, will turn from something you have to something you do.

- Get’s you out of the “This is the way I do it” mindset
- Leans you towards the “This is what I should do” or “This is the action that can be rationally justified” mindset
- It’s “ought talk”

Questions of contemporary professional ethics:

- What duties to I have, and to whom do I owe them?
- What values are reflected by the duties I’ve assumed?

Distinction between ethics and morals

- Ethics – a rational process founded on certain agreed-on principles
- Morals – the realm of religion

*Ethics begins when elements within a moral system conflict*

*Bok’s Model*

Forces you to consider the alternatives.

Based on two premises

1.) We must have empathy – though you may be disagreeing, imagining/placing yourself in another’s situation (sympathy: mutual understanding; agreement/harmony in feelings) – for the people involved in ethical decisions
2.) Maintaining a social trust is a fundamental goal.

Ethical Question should be analyzed in 3 steps:

1.) Consult your own conscience about the “rightness” of an action. *How do you feel about the action?*
2.) Seek expert advice for alternatives to the act of creating the ethical problem.
   a. Experts can be living or dead – a producer or copywriter you trust or a philosopher you admire.

   *Is there another way to achieve the same goal that will not raise ethical issues.*

3.) If possible, conduct public discussion with parties involved in the dispute.
   Includes:
   - Those directly involved – the reporter or the source
   - Those indirectly involved – a reader or a source
If they cannot be gathered, conduct the conversation hypothetically.

Goal? How will others respond to the proposed act?

Two cautions in Bok’s Ethical Model:

1.) It’s important to go through all three steps before making a final choice (avoid making ethical choices after consulting only your conscience). Bok says an error results in flabby moral thinking.

2.) While you’ll not be endowed with any clairvoyant powers to anticipate your ethical problems, the ethical dialogue outlined in the 3rd step is best when conducted in advance of the event, not in the heat of writing a story.

Truth and Truthiness

- Two Domains:
  o Moral – intended truthfulness and deception
  o Truth and falsity
- Moral question of lying – Do you intend to deceive? Along with giving partial truths to gain trust
  o Intentional manipulation of information
  o What does intent to deceive mean? – one misleads a person, leading them to believe something that the deceiver themselves do not
- False person – one who is intentionally deceitful or treacherous or disloyal
- Lie – an intentionally deceptive message in the form of a statement

Guidelines for Making Ethical Decisions

Aristotle’s Golden Mean

- Believed happiness is the ultimate good (some scholars translate happiness as flourishing)
- Practical reason was exercised by practical individuals
- Phrenemos – person of practical wisdom; one who demonstrated ethical excellence through daily activity.
- Considered citizenship as highest virtue, exemplified by a statesman or politician

Virtue Ethics – stemming from nature or the act itself and the person doing the act

1.) You must know (through the exercise of practical reasoning) what you’re doing
2.) You must select the act for its own sake – in order to flourish
3.) The act itself must spring from a firm and unchanging characters

Though Aristotle’s philosophy would allow for consulting a hero’s expertise, the trick is to select your heroes carefully while thinking for yourself rather than copying behavior you’ve seen previously.

The Golden Mean – Virtue lies at the mean between two extremes or excess and deficiency.

To exercise your own mean you must:

- Exercise practical wisdom