

**Teacher's Guide to The Ethical Audit:
An Examination of News Sources' Coverage Through An Ethical Lens**

Sheila Webb and Carolyn Nielsen, Western Washington University

Lessons from the Arthur W. Page Center for Ethics and Integrity in Public Communication

Rationale

The SPJ Code calls on journalists to tell the story of diversity, to avoid stereotyping, to “give voice to the voiceless,” and to explore their own values. Media self-examinations have been undertaken over the years in which a group of ethical leaders defines common values, performs an audit, and creates a policy for making changes. Based on the historical perspectives of the Kerner Commission and the L.A. community’s response to the Rodney King verdict, this assignment exposes students to the need for theoretical and practical perspectives on how ethical frameworks are constructed in coverage of social and political issues.

This audit assignment offers students the opportunity to apply journalistic and ethical principles to the world of journalism and thus to become aware and critical readers/viewers. A major project in a Mass Media Ethics class, this assignment asks students to perform a quarter-long audit of a news source to examine how well that source is fulfilling its obligations.

Module Format

Students conduct either a content analysis or a textual analysis of a news source (not ads). Yet, it is not enough to count something – students must also discuss how the results might affect the community of readers. Student papers are an analysis of findings as well as a discussion of the ethical issues presented. These include truth telling, right to privacy, conflict of interest, right of public to receive information, fairness, justice, loyalty, media credibility, harm to others, confidentiality, and economic concerns. Students apply four ethical theories – consequence-based (teleology), duty-based (deontology), Aristotle’s Golden Mean, and the Veil of Ignorance – to analyze how well their media source performed. Finally, they bolster their findings with scholarly research.

Some examples of student papers include: an examination of the *Los Angeles Times*' increasing use of the term "illegal immigrant" after the SPJ resolution of October 2011 which recommended avoiding the term; a study of depictions of people with mental illness in *The Seattle Times* that showed a lack of person-centered language and a marking of disability; a contemporary application of Helen Benedict's 1992 *Virgin or Vamp* to current depictions of race, class and gender in *The Seattle Times*' coverage of sexual assault, which showed a diminishment of mention of race and class, but a continuation of rape connected to sex rather than violence; a proliferation of unnamed sources in blogs versus news stories in *The New York Times*; a comparison of the gender of guests/experts on the "O'Reilly Factor" and the "Rachel Maddow Show" that showed a smaller number of women experts on the "O'Reilly Factor"; and an examination of the language used in *The New York Times* to describe Muslims over the last 10 years. Other projects analyzed sourcing. For example, although the *Seattle Times*' mission statement states a commitment to local news, the bulk of coverage in the paper comes from aggregated sources; other student papers that looked at the use of "expert" or anonymous sources in news stories in the *Seattle Times* found minimal dependence on this type of sourcing.

Learning Objectives

- To reflect on the social role and ethical duties of media professionals, to understand that the media's credibility rests on ethical approaches, and begin formulation of students' own professional ethical frameworks.
- To recognize that ethical decision-making is a component of accurate journalism that reflects the community and its needs and interests.
- To recognize that ethical decision-making is a process subject to individual and institutional judgment.
- For students to become critical consumers of media, to understand the messages that the media conveys, and to understand their own responsibilities as they themselves become conveyers of those messages.

Learning Targets

- Create a strong research question

- Choose an appropriate research domain
- Learn to define subject categories
- Conduct a thorough content or textual analysis
- Gather and report findings, incorporate and cite findings in the paper
- Look up correlation data
- Identify and define ethical issues
- Discuss those ethical issues using ethical theories and professional codes of ethics (including commission reports)
- Become familiar with utilizing scholarly research, with how it is conducted, and with citing it properly
- Learn how previous research connects with student research

Module Benefits

This assignment will give students the opportunity to apply the ethical principles they are learning in class to the real world. It offers them the chance to examine how issues are covered in their community, and to become an aware and critical reader/viewer of their local news.

Key Concepts:

- Ethical Issues in the News: truth telling, right to privacy, conflict of interest, right of public to receive information, fairness, justice, loyalty, media credibility, harm to others, confidentiality, and economic concerns.
- Application of Ethical Theories to Provide a Grounding for Decision Making: four ethical theories – consequence-based (teleology), duty-based (deontology), Aristotle’s Golden Mean, and Veil of Ignorance – to analyze how well a media source performs.

Audit Assignment Explanations

The content in this section includes a number of explanations to provide to students with as an introduction to the audit and the concepts included in this module.

Introduction of Audit to Students

In reaction to the Rodney King riots, Rushworth Kidder discussed the need for an audit of a community (Kidder, 104-107). Such self-examinations have been undertaken over the years in journalism in which a group of ethical leaders defines common values, performs an audit, and creates a policy for making changes. In our class, we have defined our common values. This assignment asks you to perform the second step: an audit to examine how well a news source is fulfilling its obligations. Thus, conducting an audit allows you to see principles in action. And, by thoroughly examining coverage, you improve your media literacy. After gathering your data, use your critical-thinking skills to examine the key issues from class discussions: truth/transparency/trust, privacy and pressures, visual elements, diversity and stereotypes, etc.

Objectives Explanation

This audit requires you to examine a news source for 30 days, or the equivalent. You will check out what's reported or pictured and how. You will perform a content analysis (basically, count how often something appears) or a textual analysis, compile your results, examine the ethical issues in your own view and in light of what scholars have said about those key principals, and then write an essay on your findings.

Beyond the 30-day requirement, it's up to you to do as much as you want; the more you examine, the better your audit will be. As you perform your audit, keep an Excel spreadsheet and mark down the date, section (if relevant), etc., and turn in with your final paper.

Questions to Consider

- What kind of news gets the most attention — politics, crime, celebrities? Do the stories provide necessary context?
- Do the media use anonymous sources, and if so, how? Do they explain why the source's name isn't used?
- How does the news source affirm accuracy?
- Do you see examples of invasion of privacy — in text and/or photographs?
- Do you see any conflicts of interest?

- What words are used to describe subjects? Is a female lawyer referred to as a “woman lawyer,” but a male lawyer as simply a “lawyer”? Is the robbery suspect black, white, Hispanic?
- Who’s missing? Are there stories about the homeless, physically challenged, etc.?
- What is the male-female ratio of subjects appearing in stories and / or photographs? What is the racial balance? What are those people doing?
- Do photographic images appear overly manipulated? Are illustrations clearly labeled?
- What differences do you find between 2 sources (if you use 2) in their approaches?
- Where do photos/stories appear; how much space is devoted to them?

Student Procedures

1. Examine daily a news source. If you are examining a newspaper or a magazine, use the print rather than the online edition; they are different.
2. Select something to audit. Some ideas might include an audit of front-page photos, examining who is pictured (and who is absent); an examination of each day’s top story on A1 or the top of the local section; an examination of when and how race and ethnicity are used in stories; an audit of male and female sources in business stories.
3. Perform your audit and record your findings. After 30 days, explore how well the newspaper’s coverage has reflected its community. For example, maybe there is a 9 men to 1 woman ratio of those pictured in *Snowboarder Magazine*, even though 40% of the readers and 40% of snowboarders are women.
4. Your final paper will be an analysis of your findings as well as an analysis of the ethical issues presented. It is not enough to count something – you must also get into how the results might affect the community of readers.
5. You may choose to compare/contrast another media outlet with your news source. For example, you might look at coverage in the *Seattle Times* as well as in a nightly Seattle newscast. It’s essential that your outlets are apples-to-apples comparisons (general market news, produced daily, serving Seattle). Don’t shy away from this as “extra work” because being able to compare and contrast actually makes writing your paper easier.

6. Finally, bolster your arguments with scholarly research you may find in class handouts, your textbook, ethics journals, etc. (For example, “The Warren Commission’s findings showed this was important because...”). We’ll talk more in class about finding scholarly sources.

Getting Started: Your Audit Summary

This includes only three components, but it’s important to put a lot of thought into it. Be as detailed as possible. Your audit summary paper should include:

1. State your research question (or two):

- *Examples:*

- R1: How many times are women quoted as sources in business stories in *The Seattle Times*?
- R2: When women are quoted, are they more often CEOs or low-level employees?

- *Examples:*

- RQ1: How many international stories are in the Seattle Times A section?
- RQ2: How many international stories are in the Vancouver Sun B section?
- RQ3: What is the subject of each story?

2. Define your research domain:

- *Examples:*

- Daily examination of every news story in the *Seattle Times* for use of the terms: “gay marriage,” “marriage equality,” “same-sex marriage,” etc., from Feb. 1, 2012, to March 1, 2012.
- Daily examination of sport photographs in the *Seattle Times* to examine gender balance from May 1, 2012, to May 31, 2012.

1. Define your categories:

- It’s important to think this through carefully ahead of time, because having to go back and recode is a pain. Put thought into your categories and know your product. For example, if you want to look at coverage of high school girls’ soccer, you should know that *The Seattle Times* does not feature extensive coverage of prep sports. You might need to redefine your domain and your categories.

- If you are looking for uses of anonymous sources, break that into categories (i.e. “unnamed government official” versus “source close to the investigation” versus “an anonymous source”).
- Categories may emerge as your study goes on. That’s fine! It’s called ethnography. Rather than trying to shove them into tidy boxes, let the categories be what they are.
- If you are examining photos, one way scholars approach this is to look at their size, whether they appear above or below the fold, etc.
- If you are examining issues, one way scholars address this is to count inches of text.
- We will discuss what you are finding, challenges to coding, etc., in class.

Module Activity: Written Paper

After devising a research question based on one of the 11 ethical issues in journalism, students will analyze a news source for 30 days (or the equivalent) through content or textual analysis and produce an 8-10 page research paper. The paper will comprise the following sections: an introduction, findings, discussion, and conclusion. The requirements for each section are explained below. The format requirements for the research paper include: a title, headers, page numbers, proper footnotes or in-text citations, and bibliography.

Introduction

The introduction includes an overview of the topic, including research questions and a definition of terms. This section should be $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ of a page that describes the research domain and clearly states what is being analyzed, how many issues, which part of the paper/magazine/broadcast, how many stories or photos are in the sample, what time period was studied. If relevant, this section will also include a rationale for the time period. For example, “This audit examined front-page articles in the *New York Times* two weeks before and two weeks after the February 7, 2012, primaries.”

Findings

This is a full report of what was found, and may cover 2-3 pages. This section includes graphs, charts, examples of photos or anecdotes from coverage to illustrate points. For example, “The

Seattle Times used the term ‘illegal aliens’ in 80% of the articles examined. A February 6 article used the term ten times.” This is also the place to discuss empirical findings and to provide the information from tables and/or graphs in appendices. Graphs must be labeled properly: title, explainer, x and y coordinates named, numbers/percentages on pie charts, etc.

This is also where correlation data should appear, which might include demographics regarding race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, religion, etc. Also included here is information from the new source’s media kit to see readership, audience, fans, etc.

Discussion

This is the most important part of the paper and should be at least 3 pages. This is where the student wrestles with the *ethical issues*. This is also where the students will analyze whether the findings would be in agreement or conflict with professional codes of ethics (SPJ, NPPA, etc.).

Students are encouraged to go to the newspaper/TV/magazine website to examine its policies. They are also strongly encouraged to contact reporters and editors and to talk to them about their decision-making processes in regard to coverage or to a particular story or issue and to quote those people in the paper. (They need to make sure to tell them they are quoting them.)

This section is also where students discuss *normative values/issues of journalism* that relate to their project, which may include truth telling, right to privacy, conflict of interest, right of public to receive information, fairness, justice, loyalty, media credibility, harm to others, confidentiality, and/or economic concerns. This is also where students discuss the issues in regard to the commission findings (Hutchins, etc.). They need to *address these 4 ethical theories* – Golden Mean, Categorical Imperative, Utilitarianism, Veil of Ignorance – and apply them to their findings.

They incorporate *scholarly research* and note whether it agrees with or conflicts with their findings. For example, “This study found gender balance between boys’ and girls’ high school basketball coverage in *The Seattle Times*. That conflicts with Smith’s 2004 study of *The*

Providence Journal's coverage, which showed serious gender imbalance with 90% of the high school basketball stories being about boys (Smith, 2004).”

Students are encouraged to include personal reflections about what surprised them and/or what they learned from the process.

Conclusion

This is a page of summary of the paper, including student opinions.

Additional Exercises

This project requires a number of foundational exercises, including a discussion of journalism codes, issues in journalism, and the ethical theories. Below are two in-class exercises that introduce codes and theories, respectively. Additional class periods are devoted to a discussion of each of the 11 issues in journalism.

In-Class Exercise on Journalism Codes

Note: This exercise follows a presentation on the history and need for codes in journalism. Although many programs post, for example, the SPJ code, we have found that students are not really aware of it. This exercise follows the teacher presentation and introduces students to the SPJ code. A similar exercise later in the quarter introduces the PRSA code.

Today, we will be discussing the role of journalism in society.

Please refer to the following handouts:

- The Canons of Journalism, from the American Society of Newspapers Editors, dated 1923.
- The SPJ Code from 1996.

For reference today and beyond:

- A compilation of codes from the Pew Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism at http://www.journalism.org/resources/ethics_codes

- ASNE *10 Best Practices for Social Media – Helpful Guidelines for News Organizations*, 2011, at: http://asne.org/article_view/articleid/1800/asne-issues-guide-to-10-best-practices-for-social-media.aspx
- *Rules of the Road – Navigating the New Ethics of Local Journalism* J-Lab, 2012, at <http://www.j-lab.org/tools/learning/ethics/ethics-policies>

For discussion today:

We will break into groups to discuss the following:

1. First, compare the document from 1923 to the SPJ code from 1996.
2. Note areas of difference as well as new categories, technologies, and issues.
3. Be prepared to describe three areas in which the media environment has changed since 1996.

If SPJ asked you to rewrite the code to take this new environment into account, do you find that traditional ethical standards should apply regardless of medium? Or, do you think that the new media environment presents challenges that should be addressed in a revised code? And, if so, how should they be addressed?

In-Class Exercise on Ethical Theories

Today, we will be discussing the ethical theories you will be using in your written work. As a way to make these theories “come alive,” we will do an exercise identifying archetypes that embody the various theories we will discuss. To get the process going, I will propose an actual and an archetype of each. During the lecture component, note the aspects of each, and be thinking of your own examples.

For discussion today:

We will break into groups to come up with your examples. Meet for 20 minutes or so and identify archetypes (not actual people) for the 4 ethical perspectives below. Discuss them in your group and take notes on what makes your examples appropriate. Write them down and then I will collect them. We will come back together as a class, you will make your case for your archetype, and we will vote for the one we feel fits the theory best.

Archetypes for:

- Golden Mean (Virtue-Based)
 - Class winners have been Pocahontas and Glinda the Good Witch.
- Categorical Imperative (Duty-Based)
 - One class winner was Jiminy Cricket.
- Utilitarian Ethics (Consequence-Based)
 - Class winners have been Captain Planet and Dr. Spock.
- Veil of Ignorance (Contract-Based)
 - One class winner was Atticus Finch.

Required Reading

Foreman, Gene. *The Ethical Journalist*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Supplemental Readings

Day, Louis Alvin. *Ethics in Media Communications: Cases and Controversies*, 5th ed.
Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 2006.

Fortner, Robert S. and Mark Fackler, ed. *The Handbook of Global Communication and Media Ethics*. Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Jensen, Klaus Bruhn. *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Kidder, Rushworth M. *How Good People Make Tough Choices: the Dilemmas of Ethical Living*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

Chicago Manual of Style – Chicago-Style Citation Quick Guide

http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

Additional Resources

Gene Foreman videos on the Center's website -

pagecenter.comm.psu.edu/index.php/ethics-in-journalism

Journal of Mass Media Ethics

Pew Center Projects - <http://pewresearch.org/about/projects/>

Poynter News University's "Ethical Decision Making" -

<http://www.newsu.org/courses/introduction-ethical-decision-making>