Student'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 you to the need for theoretical and practical perspectives on how ethical frameworks are constructed in coverage of social and political issues.

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

Module Instructions

You will conduct either a content analysis or a textual analysis of a news source (not ads). Yet, it is not enough to count something – you must also discuss how the results might affect the community of readers. Your paper is 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. You will apply four ethical theories – consequence-based (teleology), duty-based (deontology), Aristotle's Golden Mean, and the Veil of Ignorance – to analyze how well your selected media source performed. Finally, you will bolster your findings with scholarly research.

Examples of previous student work: 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 have 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 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 your 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 you to become critical consumers of media, to understand the messages that the media conveys, and to understand your own responsibilities as you become a conveyer 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 you the opportunity to apply the ethical principles we are learning in class to the real world. It offers you the chance to examine how issues are covered in our community, and to become an aware and critical reader/viewer of our 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.

Module Activity: Written Paper

After devising a research question based on one of the 11 ethical issues discussed in class, you

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: 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 a bibliography.

Introduction

The introduction includes an overview of the topic, with research questions and a definition of terms. This section should be ½ - ¾ 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, 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 you wrestle with the *ethical issues*. This is also where you will analyze whether the findings would

be in agreement or conflict with professional codes of ethics (SPJ, NPPA, etc.).

You are encouraged to go to the newspaper/TV/magazine website to examine its policies. You 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.

This section is also where you will discuss *normative values/issues of journalism* that relate to your 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 you will discuss the issues in regard to the commission findings (Hutchins, etc.). You need to *address these 4 ethical theories* – Golden Mean, Categorical Imperative, Utilitarianism, Veil of Ignorance – and apply them to your findings.

You need to incorporate *scholarly research* and note whether it agrees with or conflicts with your findings. 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)."

You are encouraged to include personal reflections about what surprised you and/or what you learned from the process.

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

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