



**The Ethics of Journalism
XCPD19201
Center for Professional and Continuing Education
Georgetown University
Spring 2008
Syllabus**

Class schedule

Wednesdays 6:00 pm - 9:00 pm
April 9, 16, 23

Instructor

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A year ago, I joined Georgetown as an assistant dean in the School of Continuing Studies. I am in charge of the Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies program, in which working adults take courses at night and on weekends toward an interdisciplinary college degree.

Before coming to Georgetown, I was a working journalist for more than 20 years. Most recently, I was a senior writer for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (<http://chronicle.com>), a weekly trade newspaper in Washington that covers all sorts of goings-on in academe. My particular assignment was to follow advanced-technology projects such as supercomputing.

Most of my career, in fact, has been spent in journalism about science, medicine, and technology. I have had enormous fun: I've been the U.S. correspondent for *New Scientist*, a British weekly science magazine, which dispatched me to the South Pole, among other interesting assignments; and a reporter for *Space News*, for which I trolled the halls of the Pentagon for news. I've walked through a nuclear reactor, seen gigantic lasers, watched the disassembly of nuclear weapons, played with DNA, witnessed a nighttime space shuttle launch, and interviewed Nobel Prize winners.

Besides being a working journalist, I also am (I hope!) a scholar of journalism. In 2002, I

earned a doctorate in mass communication from the University of Maryland at College Park. My research examines the relationships between the media and the scientific establishment. A book based on my dissertation was published in 2006.

Course goals and format

Just like (or perhaps more than) everyone else, journalists frequently confront ethical dilemmas in their daily professional lives. Sometimes these dilemmas fall into a gray area, and it can be difficult to determine the right course of action. These sorts of ethical dilemmas will be studied as well as the more obvious journalistic breaches, such as journalistic fraud, including plagiarism. This course will closely examine the cases of such notorious journalists as Janet Cooke, Jayson Blair, and Stephen Glass. The role of the journalist in society, the professional code of ethics, and the history of journalistic integrity and accepted practices will be considered. Course topics include:

- What are the ethical standards in today's media world?
- Are there really more unethical journalists today or are they just getting caught more frequently because of the ubiquity and speed of the electronic media?
- What can a journalist do to protect him or herself from committing an ethical breach?

Grades

There are no grades for this class. At the end of the course, I will submit a list of those students who have "SC" (successfully completed) the course. In order to be on that list, you must have missed no more than one of the three class meetings.

Students who miss more than one class meeting will be listed as "AT" (attendance verified) for the course.

NewsU

News University is a set of online tutorials and activities about journalism. In this class, we'll use just one of its modules -- one focusing on ethical issues. It is well done and creative. I do hope that you'll enjoy it. You should complete the module between the first and second classes. I encourage you to start early, to give yourself time to iron out any technical issues that may arise. Complete instructions for using NewsU are available on the course's Blackboard site, at campus.georgetown.edu.

Movie

As part of your assignments, you are to watch a 2003 movie, *Shattered Glass*, about the ethical lapses of a young journalist named Stephen Glass. The movie will not be shown in class; you should make arrangements to view it before the third class meeting.

You have several options for viewing the movie: A copy of *Shattered Glass* is on reserve in the Gelardin New Media Center on the first floor of the Lauinger Library; you may watch the video there. Also, many local library systems have copies for lending, and video stores such as Blockbuster have copies to rent or buy. (See www.blockbuster.com to find a local store that carries the movie.)

You should plan to watch the movie before the third class meeting; leave yourself enough time to line up a copy of the video.

Class Schedule

Each class will consist of a combination of discussion and small-group activities around the week's theme.

Class 1: Introductions to Each Other and to Ethics

Topics for Class 1:

Introductions

Overview of course

What is ethics?

Principles of media ethics

Case study: 911 calls

Class 2: Case studies

Readings and activities before Class 2:

1. Read *A Framework for Thinking Ethically* (<http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/framework.html>).
2. Read the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics (<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>)
3. Complete the *Introduction to Ethical Decision-Making* module on NewsU. Please work through the **Introduction** and **Lessons** sections of the NewsU module. In particular, please examine at least some of the following case studies in the module:
 - Car in the Canal
 - Abortion Trucks
 - Letters to Savannah
 - Death Row Daddy
 - Children in Crack House
 - Teen Depression

If you wish, you may move on to the module's **Discussion** section and post your thoughts, but this is optional. After you have completed the module, use the **Course Report** feature of the module to send a record of your activity to **vjk@georgetown.edu**.

4. After completing the NewsU module, post an answer to the discussion question in the Discussion Board section on Blackboard (campus.georgetown.edu). Check back periodically and respond to your classmates' postings.
5. Read the following two readings on the Jayson Blair case:
 - "Times Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception," *New York Times*, May 11, 2003. (Copies will be distributed in class. The newspaper's online text also is available online from many public library systems.) This is a very long article; feel free to skim it rather than reading it in its entirety.
 - Chapter 30 of *Burning Down My Master's House: My Life at The New York Times*, by Jayson Blair. (The text will be available on Blackboard; you will

need your NetID. The book also is on reserve at Lauinger Library and is available in many public library systems.)

6. Optional: Watch *Doing Ethics*, a video from the Poynter Institute for Media Studies. This 28-minute video is available online from the course's Blackboard site. A VHS tape of the video also is available in the Gelardin New Media Center on the first floor of the Lauinger Library for viewing in the library.

Topics for Class 2 meeting:

1. More on ethics in general and journalistic ethics in particular
2. Applying ethics: NewsU case studies
3. Applying ethics: Jayson Blair

Class 3: Stephen Glass; Ethics in the New Millennium

Readings and activities before Class 3:

1. Read Deborah Howell's Ombudsman column on the Editorial page of the Outlook section in Sunday's edition of *The Washington Post*. The column also is available on Washingtonpost.com (search for "Ombudsman").
2. Read Chapter 2 of *Journalism Ethics: Philosophical Foundations for News Media*, by John C. Merrill. (The chapter is available on Blackboard; you will need your NetID.)
3. Watch the 2003 movie *Shattered Glass*. (See above instructions.)
4. Read *Shattered Glass* (Vanity Fair, Sept. 1998), the article upon which the movie was based. (The chapter is available on Blackboard; you will need your NetID.)
5. Select any Ombudsman column published in the Washington Post's Sunday Outlook section (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/rss/linkset/2005/03/25/LI2005032500838.xml>) that addresses an ethical issue in journalism and prepare to lead a 5-10 minute discussion of it. In your presentation, you should briefly describe the problem that the article covered and then lead your fellow students in a discussion of the issues that it raises.

Topics for Class 3 meeting:

1. Discuss *Shattered Glass*
2. Case study discussions led by students
3. Whither journalistic ethics?