

RUNNING HEAD: THE MEANING OF ETHICS TO JOURNALISM STUDENTS

There is No Right Answer: Exploring the Meaning of Ethics to Journalism Students

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the meanings of ethics to senior-level journalism and electronic media students. Although many scholars have argued the importance of teaching media ethics and how best to teach it, there have been few research attempts to examine what journalism students actually know about ethics before they enter the workforce. Using eight qualitative interviews with graduating senior students, this study profiles what students understand about ethics and how it relates to their careers as future journalists. Through analysis, the findings show that students with more professional experience have different meanings of ethics than those with limited experiences outside the classroom, which has implications for teaching media ethics at the collegiate level.

There is No Right Answer:

Exploring the Meaning of Ethics to Journalism Students

During a period of three weeks in October 2002, a series of sniper attacks occurred in the Washington, D.C. and Baltimore areas. It was a tragic story, and one the news media reported on at length. As these heinous crimes were being committed in shopping center parking lots and along interstates, another crime was happening in one of the most respected and revered newsrooms in the country, *The New York Times*. A young reporter named Jayson Blair had been assigned to cover the sniper shootings since he was from the Baltimore area. He wrote more than 50 articles on the topic, but little did his editors or the public know that in writing these stories, he made up quotes, plagiarized information from other newspapers, and invented sources. After discovering these ethical violations within hundreds of articles, the *Times* forced Blair to resign in May 2003, and in the scandal's aftermath Executive Editor Howell Raines and Managing Editor Gerald Boyd also resigned.

Five years earlier, a similar fate happened to Stephen Glass, another young reporter who wrote for *The New Republic*, who was fired in 1998 for fabricating stories and sources. The downfalls of these young journalists, who both attended well-known journalism programs and wrote for their colleges' newspapers, have reignited public concerns about newsroom ethics and left academics and journalists wondering what aspiring reporters know about ethics while they are in and after they leave the classroom.

Some journalists face ethical dilemmas daily while others rarely encounter these situations. Despite years of experience, even veteran reporters may face an ethical decision they never anticipated. Many universities require journalism and communication students to take a media law course before graduation, and some institutions mandate that students also take an ethics course, but often times, law and ethics are combined into one course with law being the dominant subject. Many courses journalism students take during their course of study incorporate ethics to some extent, but to what extent?

Although many scholars have argued which type of ethics course is most useful, there have been few research attempts to examine the meaning of ethics to graduating journalism students. This study takes initial steps to establish this necessity.

Literature Review

Ethical Standards

Many journalists rely on ethics or guiding principles to make decisions. Journalists may face ethical decisions as basic as accepting a free t-shirt from a source or as complex as whether to photograph a murder suspect or report the name of a rape victim. They may find that their personal values conflict with the ethical decisions they must make as journalists (Olen, 1988). Some journalists say they face ethical issues on a daily or weekly basis while others say they hardly ever deal with ethical decisions (Mills, 1983).

Research has shown that journalists view and understand ethics in different ways. Whitlow and Van Tubergen (1978) found that a sample of investigative journalists fell into three different clusters of ethic styles. The group that they belonged to was determined by how they said they would respond to particular situations. Type A reporters were shaped by their compassion for other people. Type B journalists strongly felt that it was their job to report a story no matter what. Those in Type C, were similar to Type A, but less likely to steal and more willing to suppress a story for national security reasons. There was some overlap between the groups, but a pattern emerged. When the same test was performed on journalism students across the country, similar patterns developed.

Despite the lack of a profession-wide ethics code, Singletary, Caudill, Caudill, and White (1990) found that many of the journalists who participated in their study had similar ideas about ethics, such as a concern for audience credibility, the public's need for information, and the standards of their co-workers and employer. The authors also found several sub-groups of journalists who had somewhat different priorities. One group was willing to punish others with

their news work and seemed a bit unconcerned about ethics. Another group showed that they did not accept personal advancement as a reason for ethical decisions.

Several recent studies have assessed journalism students' knowledge and attitudes about professional ethics. Peck (2004) found that students entering a mandatory journalism ethics course had misplaced confidence about their abilities to identify potential ethical dilemmas and would often not take a stand when an ethical dilemma involved their own work. However, students who indicated they were receiving or had received professional training outside of the classroom were better able to correctly answer case-study questions.

When compared to professional journalists, journalism students appeared more ethically grounded in a study by Reinardy and Moore (2005). Their results showed that introductory print and broadcast journalism students had a higher standard of ethics than graduating students, and graduating students ranked higher than professional journalists, suggesting that more practical experience could result in poorer-defined ethical perceptions.

Teaching Media Ethics

American journalism schools have been teaching ethics since the 1920s when journalist and writer Walter Lippman approached the topic in his books about declining journalism standards. The work of Lippmann and others appeared in public through the 1930s, and then after World War II, some media critics felt the role of the press in American society needed a deeper exploration, and the 1947 Report of the Commission on Freedom of the Press was released. The report was criticized since the commission did not have any journalists or editors as members (Lambeth et. al, 2004).

From the 1960s through the 1980s, social, economic, and political changes in American society provided a motivation for media criticism and reform. A 1980 study helped shape the rationale for increased media ethics instruction. Clifford C. Christians and Catherine L. Covert published "Teaching Ethics in Journalism Education," which outlined what steps needed to be taken to improve teaching ethics to future journalists.

The authors reviewed different approaches that journalism and mass communication programs used to teach ethics from combining law and ethics into one course and offering courses about the history and principles of journalism and responsibilities in mass communication to offering a stand-alone ethics course (Christians & Covert, 1980).

The debate continues more than 25 years later since there are professors and administrators who advocate the “pervasive method” of incorporating ethics within courses across the journalism curriculum. Others believe the extent and severity of problems facing media require a separate ethics course to address the variety of issues (Lambeth et. al, 2004).

In a 2003 survey of journalism program administrators and editors conducted by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, 73% of journalism school directors agreed with the statement: “Today’s journalism graduates have a better understanding of journalism ethics than graduates had five years ago,” but 69% of the newspaper editors disagreed (Stinnett, 2003). This research provides support that there is a disconnect between the journalism classroom and the journalism newsroom.

More journalism programs are requiring students to take an ethics course. In a 2001-2002 survey, researchers found that about 37 percent of journalism and mass communications programs require students to take a media ethics class, compared to 25 percent in 1992-1993. Eleven and a half percent of the journalism schools offer media ethics as an option on a list of required courses, and 83 percent of programs offer media ethics modules within skills or conceptual courses (Lambeth et. al, 2004).

Study Rationale

As evidenced in the literature above, many researchers have studied media ethics and teaching media ethics at length using various approaches. More often than not, these approaches are quantitative, with surveys or questionnaires being distributed to participants. Reinardy and Moore (2005) used descriptive surveys to determine the attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and values students and professionals hold about specific journalism behaviors.

Another common method has been to examine the moral development of journalists and journalism students using the Defining Issues Test, and more recently, a test developed specifically for journalists called the *Journalist's Instrument* (Westbrook, 1994). These tests present participants with journalistic moral dilemmas, followed by survey items presenting an issue for consideration in solving it. A participant rates and ranks the items in terms of their importance in making a decision about the dilemma. Based on rankings and ratings, a person receives a p score on a scale from 0 to 95, and the higher the score, the higher level of moral development and ethical reasoning.

One main limitation of previous research has been the inability of researchers to discover what ethics means to journalism students and what their perceptions are about media ethics. Researchers have assessed levels of moral reasoning with p scores, but one is left to wonder what the meaning of ethics is to individual journalism students as well as what they know about ethics and how it relates to their careers as future journalists.

In addressing the central research question of what does media ethics mean to senior-level journalism students, the researcher wanted to determine what differences and similarities there are among students studying journalism and electronic media in terms of their meanings of media ethics and perceptions of how ethics relates to their future careers as journalists.

This research question advanced from the paradigmatic perspective of phenomenology with the goal being to obtain a first-person account of an experience. Patton (1990) describes a study that is phenomenological in nature as “one that focused on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience” (p.71).

Method

In order to better understand the phenomenon of interest, the meaning of ethics to journalism students, a qualitative research approach was designed. A qualitative method offers more possibility of exploring the motivations and self-perceptions of a target group, a goal that quantitative research cannot accomplish. In qualitative research, even a small sample has the

potential to offer insight (Denscombe, 1998).

The purpose of this study was to discover what assumptions students have about ethics. As McCracken (1988) explains, the goal of the qualitative interview is “to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one’s culture construes the world. How many and what kinds of people hold these categories and assumptions is not, in face, the compelling issue” (p. 17).

The long interview method was used since it is one of the most utilized and powerful methods in qualitative research according to McCracken. He claims this method offers access into the lifeworld of someone else. “The long interview gives us the opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves” (p. 9).

The researcher chose to interview senior journalism and electronic media students at a large Southeastern university since this group has completed almost all course work required for graduation and will soon enter the workforce. Since previous research (Stinnett, 2003) has shown journalism school directors differ in opinion greatly from newsroom editors as to how well journalism graduates understand media ethics and how to handle ethical dilemmas, the researcher wanted to determine what these senior journalism students really know and comprehend about ethics.

The researcher obtained access to this group of students by contacting the professors of several of the senior-level journalism and electronic media courses and asking permission to speak briefly in class about the research project. In addition to speaking in several classes, the researcher sent an e-mail message to a list of senior journalism and electronic media majors explaining the study and asking for volunteers. The researcher used both recruitment techniques in hopes of obtaining a higher number of volunteers for the study.

The in-class explanation and e-mail told students they would be interviewed in person about their experiences as journalism major. As McCracken (1988) points out, one of the dangers a researcher must confront with the long interview method is not to reveal the objectives of the

research so the participant will provide “spontaneous and unstudied responses” (p. 27). Since the researcher wanted the true realities of the participants, students were not told that the questions would address ethics.

Students who volunteered to participate in the research were contacted via e-mail by the researcher to arrange a time for the interview. The students were interviewed one-on-one with the researcher in a conference room on campus to ensure privacy. Each participant prior to the interview signed a consent form, approved by the college’s Institutional Research Board. Participants also signed a copy to keep for their records, and it listed the researcher’s contact information in case the participants had any future questions or concerns.

In order to build a level of trust with the participants, they were assured of confidentiality and told that all files would be secured, and the final report would not include any names or distinguishing factors that could lead others to identify their comments.

All of the interviews were recorded using a digital audio recording device so that transcripts could be typed and systematically analyzed. Recording the interviews, instead of simply taking notes, allowed the researcher to concentrate on listening and responding to the interviewee. According to Hancock (1998), taped interview discussions flow better because the interviewer does not have to write down the response to one question before moving on to the next. “Tape recording ensures that the whole interview is captured and provides complete data for analysis so cues that were missed the first time can be recognized when listening to the recording.”

The interviews were transcribed by the researcher. Transcription provided a full script of the interview, so the researcher could analyze the key themes surfacing from the text. The transcriptions also contribute to the credibility of the study since the researcher included excerpts from the transcripts in the findings section of this paper.

Eight interviews were completed by the researcher during the spring of 2007, and each interview lasted from 25 to 45 minutes and yielded a typed transcript of about six to ten pages.

Although statistical representativeness is not a goal of qualitative research, it is interesting to note that of the eight respondents, five were female and three were male. There also was a representation of print and broadcast journalism majors with some participants having work experience at newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, and online publications. All respondents are in their early 20s with the exception of a female who is in her late 30s.

The researcher worked from a discussion guide comprised of ten to twelve open-ended questions. The role of a discussion guide is to serve as starting point for a conversation in which the course of the interview is determined mainly by the respondent.

The first interview question was “Tell me about yourself” most often followed by “Describe some of your experiences as a journalism and electronic media major.” This second question allowed the researcher to learn what internships or jobs the students had completed related to journalism. The next question asked the students to talk about the classes they have taken. Several of them mentioned the required senior-level law and ethics course. Once this happened, the researcher asked specifically “What does ethics mean to you?” If the participant did not mention this course, then the researcher asked if he or she had taken a required law and ethics class as a prompt.

Based on the data and the initial analyses of the first few interviews, the researcher refined the discussion guide for the remaining interviews. Using the grounded theory perspective, researchers are encouraged to modify interview questions “on the basis of emerging relevant concepts” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 207).

The remaining questions asked if students have faced ethical dilemmas related to journalism previously and how they handled these situations. They also were asked about their future plans and if they think they will encounter ethical dilemmas in their careers.

In order to determine how many interviews to conduct, the redundancy measure was utilized, in which the number of interviews continued until there were clear themes and patterns in the comments of the participants (Taylor, 1994). A content comparison between the first three

interview transcripts and the last three interviews showed a high level of redundancy among concepts and themes, so the researcher decided to work with the eight interviews collected and cease further interviews. McCracken (1998) even states that eight respondents is usually sufficient for most research projects (p. 17).

Analysis

Data were analyzed through the process of analytic induction, which consisted of examining the transcripts for themes and categories to develop a representation of meaning. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), this process allows the researcher to conceptualize and reduce data in order to develop categories and themes. Goetz and LeCompte (1981) outline analytic induction in six steps: 1) scanning of data collected in field notes to identify categories and attributes; 2) additional scanning of the data for other examples of categories; 3) creating typologies for categories; 4) determining the relationships that exist between categories; 5) creating hypotheses from the relationships discovered; 6) seeking examples that contradict hypotheses; and 7) continually refining hypotheses until all examples are accounted for and explained. The researcher followed these steps of analysis.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

One of the key criteria addressed by positivist researchers is that of internal validity. Positivist researchers are highly concerned with the internal validity of their studies and if they are measuring what they intend to measure. According to Merriam (1998), the qualitative investigator's equivalent concept, credibility, deals with the question, "How congruent are the findings with reality?" Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that ensuring credibility is one of most important factors in establishing trustworthiness.

The entire analysis process aims to examine the lived experiences and realities from the ones who produced the experience rather than imposition of other people's interpretations. It should be the interpretations of the participants in the phenomenon under study that define the commonalities of the lived experience in the phenomenon. It is not the researcher's own thinking

of the phenomenon, the other researchers' experience of the phenomenon, or the theoretical descriptions of the phenomenon that are under analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In this study, the researcher studied the phenomenon of what senior journalism students know about media ethics. In order to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of this study, the researcher took several steps to guarantee its integrity.

Member checks is what Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider the single most important provision that can be made to strengthen a study's credibility. Respondents are asked to review the transcripts of what they said during the interview, and the emphasis is whether they think their words match what they actually intended to say. Therefore, after the interviews were transcribed, the transcriptions were e-mailed to the participants for review in order to guarantee that the comments of the participants were understood correctly. All but one participant responded and indicated their approval. The researcher contacted the participant who did not respond two additional times via e-mail, but never received a response. Four respondents offered minor corrections of factual points.

The researcher also had a colleague who has experience with qualitative research to review the first draft of the findings. This input helped to confirm conceptual credibility.

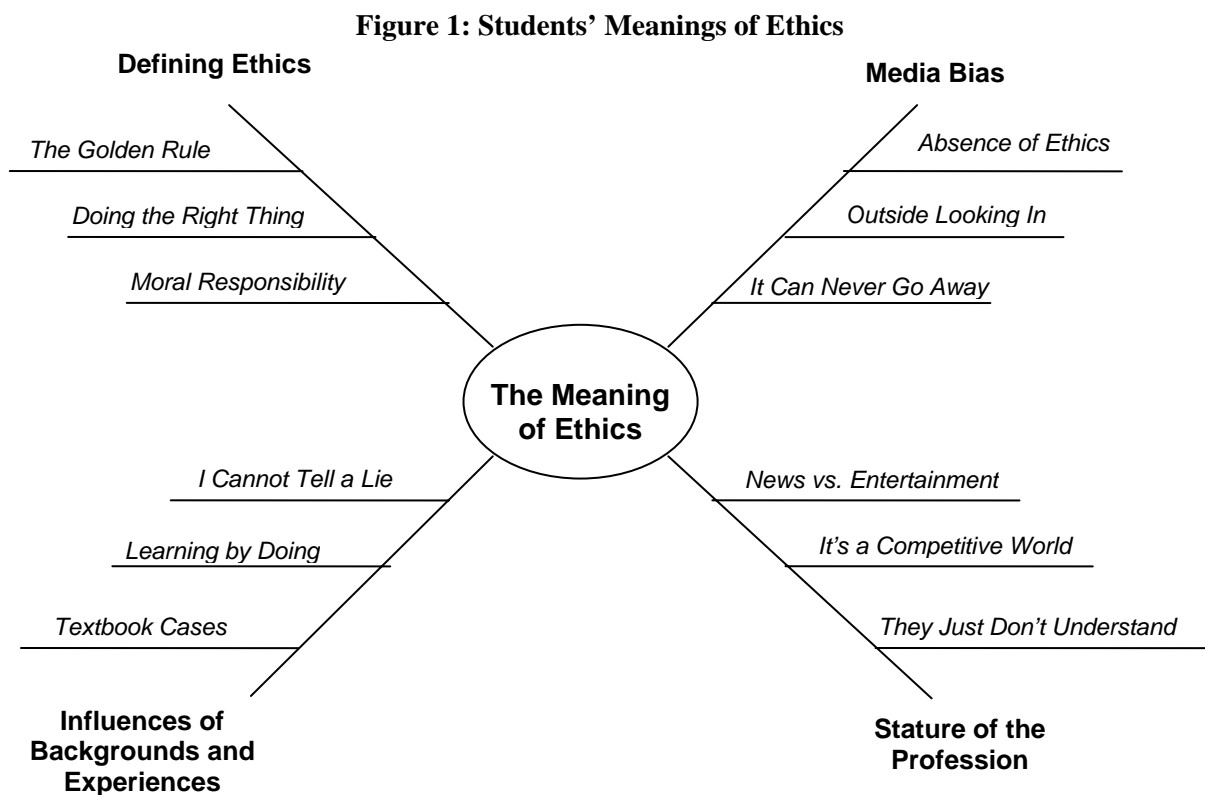
Findings

Journalism students' meanings of ethics are created from a variety of perceptions and knowledge bases which creates a web of ideas woven together that reflect what ethics means to them, as well as what they know and have learned about the topic. The four main categories that express their meanings of ethics are: the respondents' definition of ethics; the influences of their backgrounds and experiences; what they think about the relationship between ethics and media bias; and the stature of the journalism profession.

The responses show that students with more professional media experience are able to discuss concrete examples of ethical situations and how they had solved and would solve them. Their meaning of ethics differed somewhat from students who have limited professional

experience. Respondents discussed ethics in terms of its relationship to bias, media law, the public’s perception of journalists and the competitive nature of journalism.

Figure 1 is a composite representation of the meanings expressed by the students. The respondents’ own words are used to document how the meaning of ethics is related to each category. The left side of the figure represents an ethical orientation gained from personal experiences, while the right side denotes unethical tendencies that have evolved from environmental cues.



Defining Ethics

Respondents defined ethics in general terms ranging from “morals” and “doing the right thing” to “not lying,” and “common sense.” All respondents were able to give a basic definition of ethics. One respondent referred to ethics as the “golden rule.”

Ethics is important to life and it’s not just media...it’s in everything that you do. You treat people with respect. It’s like the golden rule, “Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you.” It’s that kind of situation. (Respondent #2)

Another respondent defined ethics as doing the right thing for society.

Ethics to me is, given all the facts, that you are making the best decision and making the right choice for society, not just the ethical choice for yourself, but the ethical choice for everyone involved in the situation considering all the components. (Respondent #7)

Influences of Background and Experiences

Personal, professional, and educational backgrounds and experiences contributed to respondents' knowledge bases of ethics with a few indicating that being ethical is a behavior they learned at a young age.

I Cannot Tell a Lie

I was always the kid who could never lie. I could never steal, never lie, so if somebody did something, and somebody asked me what happened, I'd tell them. I wouldn't lie. I've always been very ethical in my personal life anyway. (Respondent #8)

One respondent grew up in a family involved in media. Her grandfather and father were in the newspaper and broadcast businesses, and she said discussions about ethics often developed, which led to what she described as her "innate sense" of ethics.

My grandfather was a very formal man...He definitely knew his news. He was very giving with us...sharing with us. He would tell us this is what is going on here, and it's very wrong. This person did this, and this is why they shouldn't have done it. He was great about explaining, and my father was very good about that as well. I think I have a hyper sense of ethics because of this exposure to ethics all my life. I'm the type of person who might tap a car, and even though there's nothing wrong with it, I'm still going to leave a note because it's the right thing to do. I get teased at work for being that, but I know I can sleep at night. (Respondent #7)

These comments suggest that ethics can be ingrained based on personal experiences when individuals are younger.

Learning from Doing

While all respondents had held some type of internship or job related to the media, there were varying levels of experience among them. Several respondents had only worked for one or two semesters at a campus radio station or college magazine with limited news experience and exposure to specific journalistic ethical dilemmas. Others had held internships and full-time positions at radio and television stations, national magazines and a marketing firm. Only a few

respondents had faced ethical dilemmas related to journalism in their internships or jobs, but they credit their “on the job” experience with increasing their awareness of ethical issues in the media and how to solve them.

There are ethical decisions all the time with clients. I’ve had clients who are less than upstanding, and do you keep them as clients and lay out the publication for them or not? Some of the hardest decisions I’ve made is walking away from the money. I’ve told them that I appreciate that you need this done, but I’m not willing to print that number that you want me to print. I’m not willing to say that just to make you happy, so you can go lie about it, and then put us at risk for printing it. (Respondent #7)

Learning from other journalists already in the field contributed to other respondents figuring out how to handle ethical situations.

I know the weekend Saddam Hussein was hung, I worked Friday night and again Saturday morning at the television station. I remember I had worked Friday night at the desk, when he was hung, and the video wasn’t available yet. When I came back Saturday morning, the video was available. My producer and I went over it, and we’re like, it’s not that bad, but it’s first thing on a Saturday morning. So we called the news director to see what he wanted to do, and he was like, since I haven’t seen it yet, I would rather not use it. We tend to air on the safer side of things. We’re likely to let CNN air it first. So by lunchtime, we aired it since other stations had aired it. (Respondent #5)

Around Christmas, the college sent the newspaper a big fruit basket, thanking them for covering their sports and stuff. The reporters said they can’t really accept that kind of stuff...I wouldn’t have taken the fruit basket. I would have said thank you, but I’m too involved, and I wouldn’t have kept it. The person in the office didn’t either. He gave it away, which is a good way to solve the problem. (Respondent #4)

Another respondent said she has seen examples of plagiarized stories because students know what they “can get away with,” and she also struggles at times with choosing not to take this approach.

At the station or for class, people will go online, and they’ll see a very similar story or something, and they’ll just change around the wording. That happens all the time. They’ll rearrange it a little bit, but there was no effort put into it...I’m torn on if this is wrong at times because it’s a lot of work to rewrite a story, and sometimes, there just isn’t time to do it. (Respondent #3)

Textbook Cases

All respondents had taken or were currently taking a required senior-level media law and ethics course, which for some was their first exposure to media ethics. One student described the class as “scary” while another called it the “don’t get sued class.” Others stated their professional

experiences had helped them in the class when they had to write ethics papers and explain what they would do in certain situations and why.

Several students gave clear distinctions between law and ethics.

You have to say to yourself “Well it’s not against the law to say these things about people, but is it really right to do it?” (Respondent #1)

You’re dealing with ethics, and then you’re dealing with libel and slander suits sometimes. Sometimes people may try to go after you because they think you’ve libeled them, but you’ve done it ethically. But you have to make sure you do it ethically, because if you don’t, that’s another part of it. You can end up in a lawsuit. (Respondent #2)

Whatever is legal isn’t always ethical in most cases. You have the Society of Professional Journalists, and they have a pretty good ethical code. I mean it’s really strong, and it’s stronger than most laws for journalists. So they hold themselves to a high standard, but unfortunately, that doesn’t mean all journalists hold themselves to a high standard. (Respondent #8)

Another respondent, however, treated law and ethics as the same concept.

Media ethics is knowing what is right say because if you say the wrong thing, then the next thing you know, you’re getting sued. (Respondent #6)

Several students commented that the combined law and ethics course focused a great deal more on law, and there was little time to discuss or learn about ethics. When asked about a stand-alone ethics course, responses varied. Some students, who did not have as much professional experience, said they would benefit from a separate ethics course or at least other courses devoting more attention to ethics.

It would give everyone a sense of where that line is because it can get blurry sometimes. It would give everyone an equal playing ground. (Respondent #3)

It probably wouldn’t hurt, but if each class had two or three lectures devoted to it, that would be good. Because there are some gray areas out there, and it’s hard to decide what to do. (Respondent #4)

Another respondent who is older and has had more on-the-job training said it would be a good course for others to take, but she did not see the necessity in taking it.

I don’t see a need for it because I think ethics is just making the right choice and doing the right thing. To me that should be so clear. I mean I guess if you didn’t have a firm foundation of what you should and shouldn’t do in life, then maybe you would want that course. But maybe where I am in life, it’s just not of interest to me. I’ve been lucky to have grown up with a good sense of morals and ethics, but many students, I think

especially today, don't, so they would probably benefit from more ethical discussions in class and an ethics class. (Respondent #7)

These comments suggest that many students would enjoy and benefit from a stand-alone ethics course. Even the students with more professional hands-on experience realize their fellow classmates might not be at the same level and need additional training. One respondent also noted that journalists should take "refresher" ethics courses throughout their careers.

Media Bias

The relationship between ethics and bias also was apparent in the data. Several respondents cited bias as an absence of ethics and defined bias as "taking sides in a story" and "not being fair and objective."

Outside Looking In

Journalists are supposed to have this, kind of, unbiased thing. They are supposed to be as unbiased as a person can be when reporting, and that's what a good ethical journalist does. They let the facts speak for themselves. That is what most people should strive towards. (Respondent #3)

It Never Goes Away

The respondents also expressed their belief that bias exists in the media despite how journalists are taught to remain as objective as possible with one respondent saying it was "human nature" to be at least somewhat biased.

A lot of times with the really hard stuff, the really gruesome murder cases...It's hard not to paint a picture of somebody without know them. It's hard to not put your opinion into something you think is wrong, but you have to do it. It's just part of it. (Respondent #5)

Bias in the media? Oh yeah, it's there. This is something I debate in the shower. I'm like, hmm, is there bias in the media? Is it possible for a journalist not to be biased? I think there is a lot of bias that shouldn't be there. I think there is some that you just can't help but have. For instance, I'm biased against criminals. If someone preys on innocent people, then I have a bias against it. So it's going to be harder for me to write a story about the criminal. I mean, could I do it? I think I could do it, and do it fairly, but I think there is still going to be some bias in it. (Respondent #8)

Another respondent talked about what he described as "blatant cases of media bias" in regards to sports reporting.

You'll hear reporters say "Go UT." If they are doing play-by-play for a game, they shouldn't say "Go Vols." That's getting too involved. I don't like it when you see former players calling the game. It will be a Tennessee/Florida game, and the former UT and Florida players are doing the play-by-play. If they are going to call a game, they should go cover an Alabama/Auburn game because they don't have any ties. As a former player, you won't be able to set aside your biases. (Respondent #4)

Stature of the Profession

When discussing ethics, the public's perception of the media was introduced with many respondents stating that a change in what type of stories are reported and how they are reported has led to a decrease in ethical values along with a negative perception of journalists.

News vs. Entertainment

Several respondents said the lines between news and entertainment are now blurred, creating ethical dilemmas since corporations want to create more profits and not better journalists. Several respondents brought up the recent death of celebrity Anna Nicole Smith as an example.

You see it all the time on entertainment shows. You see people making up things about different things going on in the public. Like, Anna Nichole for instance, as soon as she died, the media sat there and bashed her! That's not ethical! Yeah, she didn't lead a great life, but who are we to judge. Ethically, that's not right. I know it's news, but still. (Respondent #6)

Yeah, I definitely think people ultimately say they don't want to see something or see violence, or that they are tired of Anna Nicole, but those are huge ratings for the company, and the president of that company says more, more, more because it's all about the ratings. It's about money, and it's always been about money. But I think there was more journalist integrity than there is now. It's a vicious cycle of money...and so much of what we see isn't printed with integrity or broadcast with integrity. (Respondent #7)

It's a Competitive Business

Competition among media to be first to report a story also influences media ethics according to respondents. One respondent, who works at a television station, referred to it as the "bulldog effect," in which media hound sources for information in order to get the information and tell the story first.

We were the first station to break it because we had a good source. We have a reporter who is just a bulldog when it comes to reporting on city government. We had received some paperwork at the last minute about some shady deals the sheriff made under the

table, and we we're like, do we trust this? Is it really for sure? We didn't have times to make phone calls and check, so we went with it. (Respondent #5)

Another respondent who works at a radio station disagreed, stating that reporters should only use information they know is right.

I think the biggest part is knowing the information and being sure about it before you get it out there because the first time you give wrong information that's going to be remembered for a long time. I think the biggest part is making sure you're right, and the second part is getting it out there first. It is important to get it first, but it's more important to get it right. (Respondent #2)

They Just Don't Understand

Respondents also commented that they dislike the public's negative perception of the media, but understand why it exists. However, several students said they do not think the public understands the job of a journalist.

There's a lot of criticism of writers and journalists because there are people who go after things like the Britney Spears stories. That's not what real journalists do. I feel like we're not taken seriously. People take us for granted a lot and don't appreciate what we do. (Respondent #1)

The job of a journalist is to inform the public, which is really interesting because most of the public isn't that well informed. They can't name the justices of the Supreme Court, but they know the names of the Seven Dwarfs or the cast members on *Survivor*...I think the public is really too lazy because they don't want to dig for news. They don't want to read *The New York Times* because the articles are too long, and there aren't any pictures. It's just really frustrating. I think journalists are at the spot where they can't keep catering to the lowest common denominator, and they have to come up with new ways to engage the public because their job is to inform the public. (Respondent #8)

As these quotes demonstrate journalism students understand the public's negative perception of the media, but they do not agree with it.

Discussion and Implications

This qualitative study has expanded the body of knowledge concerning the meaning of ethics to journalism students in ways that quantitative studies before it have not. The findings reported here have shown that while senior-level journalism students can provide a general definition of ethics, many of them have not faced ethical dilemmas thus far in their careers and appear to be unsure how to handle these situations.

This study supports previous research that students with more professional experience outside the classroom understand ethics differently than those whose only exposure to media ethics has been through coursework. The discovery has implications for the teaching of media ethics in journalism programs across the country. Students can recite a definition of ethics, but often times cannot explain how ethics is related to the media. Several respondents even stated they would advise younger students to gain more experience since they only had one internship. Other students with more professional experience said they felt they know more about ethics and how to deal with ethical dilemmas than classmates who have limited professional experience.

The type of professional experience also led to different realities of the students. Working a couple of days a week at a campus radio station that produces a short newscast is not the same as working 30-40 hours a week at an internship or job. The campus radio stations is far less likely to face daily or even weekly ethical dilemmas when compared to a television station producing numerous and longer newscasts every day.

These findings obviously suggest there is a need for students to learn more about ethics while they are in college and perhaps be strongly encouraged and even required to gain more professional experience at media organizations. While a stand-alone ethics course would benefit students and help some individuals learn the clear difference between law and ethics, it would still be a classroom experience, and many students need exposure to ethics in a real life situation to understand what is at stake.

Many times in ethical dilemmas, there are no clear answers or even right choices. Essentially, there is no right answer, so students must learn to make the best decision possible given all the facts of a situation. The comments from the respondents in this study indicate that there is a disconnect between what students are learning in and out of the classroom and what many professors and news directors think they should be learning about media ethics.

Future research should involve additional interviews and a focus group of the participants to discuss what the researcher has heard and transcribed during this initial study. The discussion

during this focus group meeting will hopefully allow each participant to see that his or her ideas are included in the analysis but also allow the researcher to improve the interpretations and discover if new realities emerge.

According to Guba (1990), the use of different methods compensates for their individual limitations and exploits their respective benefits. If these different approaches yield similar findings and general themes and assumptions are formalized, confidence in these preliminary findings will increase.

Also, since these findings show that students with more professional experience possess a firmer understanding of ethics, it would be interesting to interview older students who are returning to school after years of on-the-job experiences and also talk to master's students, many of whom likely earned a bachelor's degree and entered the workforce for a time before returning to graduate school. These groups would have significantly more professional experience, so their responses could assist in making this study's findings stronger.

The researcher did not present any ethical case studies to the participants to find out what they would do in certain situations, so it would be beneficial, especially for the respondents who have not faced ethical dilemmas, to discover their approaches and methods of thinking.

Also, the university where this study took place is planning to institute a separate media ethics course for advanced journalism undergraduates in the near future, so the researcher would like to determine if this new course will change the realities and meaning of ethics to students.

This research makes no claims to generalize its findings beyond the eight respondents studied. However, it is reasonable to assume that the meaning of ethics to senior-level journalism students enrolled in other programs may be similar along with their experience levels. There is a need to expose students to ethical situations in the classroom and the professional world in order for them to learn how to handle these dilemmas that undoubtedly will surface during their media careers.

This initial study has filled a gap in the body of knowledge related to what senior-level journalism students know and understand about ethics. The findings contribute to other research and can be used to understand and improve how journalism students learn about media ethics.

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