

Media Ethics and Journalism Education at the University of St. Thomas

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The Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of St. Thomas has a capstone course titled "Media Ethics" that all seniors majoring in journalism are required to take. The purpose of the ethics seminar is to examine moral and ethical principles and their application to current problems in the major media. This course was the brainchild back in the 1950s of the Rev. James W. Whalen, the first full-time chair of the Department of Journalism. Father Whalen, who retired from teaching in 1993, wrote in the Winter 1995 issue of St. Thomas, the magazine of the University of St. Thomas, that the Media Ethics course is "the foundation of all that we do" and that it is "the essence of what is meant by liberal arts and journalism."

St. Thomas' Statement of Purpose (Mission) as well as its Convictions (Beliefs) were not "in place" at the time Father Whalen developed the media ethics seminar, but here are some key points from those documents that illustrate how well the ethics seminar ties in with what St. Thomas aims to do:

St. Thomas seeks to develop morally responsible individuals who combine career competency with cultural awareness and intellectual curiosity. St. Thomas, in its undergraduate programs, is committed to the development of the student through a liberal arts education within the living Catholic tradition. The Catholic tradition fosters a values-oriented education needed for complete human development and for responsible citizenship in contemporary society.

The Mission Statement of the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication also refers to "a values-oriented education." This type of education, according to the department's statement, "adheres to legal and ethical principles." The statement also refers to the Journalism Department's efforts to ensure that students "discover that the mass media have a social responsibility to serve the common good, that with First Amendment freedoms come obligations."

In regard to this concept of the "common good," the Journalism Department looks to a document issued in 1991 by Archbishop John Roach of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. In a pastoral letter on social justice, called "Reviving the Common Good," Archbishop Roach said that the "dignity of the individual is inherently connected to the good of society" and that "everyone has an obligation to contribute to the good of the whole society, to the common good." We must "respect each person's basic rights and fulfill our responsibilities," the archbishop continued, in order for us to advance "the common good." He said that he believed that "restoring a healthy commitment to the common good is one of the most significant social tasks of our time."

One of the Journalism Department's faculty members, Dr. Kristie E. Bunton, is a specialist in media ethics who did her Ph.D., work in that field. Dr. Bunton, who teaches three sections of the media ethics seminar each year, joined the department in 1993. The remaining section of the media ethics seminar is taught by the department's chair, Dr. Thomas Connery, who began teaching a section of the course several years ago while Father Whalen was still teaching but had cut down on his load.

Dr. Bunton, in the syllabus for her ethics course, states that the course examines ethical issues in news, advertising, public relations and entertainment media. She says that "real-world issues will be examined in the context of several ethical issues and theories (absolutism, relativism, social responsibility or virtue ethics, for example) and in the context of various roles (for example, people who work in media, people who view, read and listen to media or people whose lives are featured by media)."

Her syllabus continues that she hopes the course will help students develop these characteristics: 1) moral sensitivity and imagination; to recognize ethical issues in mass media, to imagine various ways to resolve those issues and to envision how the resolution of issues affects other people; 2) analytical skills; to begin to apply specific ethical theories and values to the ethical issues that students recognize and to make those applications in a principled and defensible manner; 3) an understanding of oneself as a moral agent; to see that each person has ethical choices and responsibilities whether he or she is a newspaper reporter, an advertising salesperson, a public relations account executive or one of the millions of people in the media audience; to think about how to resolve conflicts between one's professional and personal values and to think about what one stands for; 4) a tolerance of conflicting views; each of us, as an autonomous moral agent, may have differing ethical values, and these values no doubt will collide, but each of us should use our moral sensitivity and analytical skills to try to understand why someone else may hold a differing view, and we should try to discern why we think that view is defensible.

Dr. Connery, in his syllabus for the media ethics seminar, describes the course as a capstone seminar dealing with mass media ethics and responsibility. He says that the course will consider broad ethical issues, theories of ethics and responsibility, and specific case applications in public relations, advertising, journalism (broadcast, newspaper and magazine) and the visual forms they take or may use. He concludes that "the nature and roots of media responsibility" will be examined and that he and the students will consider "why and how we can expect the media to behave according to certain moral principles." He refers to the "common good" in his syllabus with this statement: "A given in this course is that the mass media have a social responsibility to serve the common good."

His syllabus continues that the course "attempts to merge principle with practice" so that "students will become better able to identify ethical violations, and then reflect first rather than merely react." Dr. Connery says that he wants students to "move beyond emotional or prejudiced responses to ethical dilemmas to a careful consideration of actions based on principles." In a concluding paragraph regarding the course description, he tells his

students that they not only should develop their "understanding of what it means to be a moral agent in the world of mass media" but that they also should "fine-tune" their "ability to think and act ethically, to reason morally, whether you will be working in advertising, public relations, broadcast news, newspapers, magazines or for a video company."

Dr. Connery, in his syllabus, also informs students of the kinds of research projects that students have worked on in the past. Some of the paper titles include "False Images: The Portrayal of Women in Advertising," "Media and Minorities: An Ethical Consideration," "The Moral Dimension of 'News': Responsibilities and Borders," "The Infomercial: New Ethical Plaque for Advertising," "Ethical Public Relations: Dealing With Controversial Situations and Clients," "News and the Ethics of Omission" and "Sex Education 101: TV and Sexual Morality."

The required textbook for the media ethics seminar is the fourth edition of *Media Ethics; Cases & Moral Reasoning* by Clifford G. Christian, Mark Fackler and Kim B. Rotzoll. Additional readings are contained in the second edition of *Media Ethics; Issues and Cases* by Philip Patterson and Lee Wilkins, plus articles on reserve in the library.

In the Christian, et al., book, which is the principal book used in the media ethics seminar, the authors point out that "media ethics ought to be more than a description of professional ethics." For that reason, the authors said that in their book they would analyze cases and connect them with ethical guidelines and that readers "will be prodded and stimulated to think ethically." In the introduction to their book, the authors delineate five ethical guidelines, one of which is "Judeo-Christian Persons as Ends." They point out that although "ethical norms of nearly all kinds emerge from various religious traditions ... the Judeo-Christian tradition has dominated American culture to the greatest extent, and its theological ethics have been the most influential."

This tradition and its influence certainly have affected the hundreds of St. Thomas journalism graduates. "Raising the level of moral and ethical responsibility on the part of the individual" has been Father Whalen's greatest satisfaction from his long years of teaching. This is what he told Joe Soucheray, a St. Thomas journalism graduate who is a columnist for the Saint Paul Pioneer Press. Soucheray wrote a column in tribute to Father Whalen when he stepped down as chair of the Journalism Department in 1987.

In 1990, when the national Society of Professional Journalists gave Father Whalen its distinguished teaching award, another St. Thomas journalism alumnus, James Walsh, wrote in the Minneapolis Star Tribune that Father Whalen's ethics seminars are what "seem to stick" when graduates get out into the working world. In his article, Walsh quoted an alumnus who works as a reporter for the Chicago Tribune. "We had to take a role," said Bill Presecky of the ethics seminar, adding, "Getting the news is our job, but how we get the news is perhaps more important. I think he was way ahead of his time." Walsh also quoted the accolades of professionals who knew Father Whalen not as their teacher but from his reputation as an ethicist. For example, Dr. Everette Dennis, a friend of Father Whalen's who now directs the Freedom Forum Center for Media Studies at

Columbia University in New York City, said that Father Whalen is "a person of passionate views of what journalism and journalism values are all about. He teaches lessons that are imprinted on people's minds; they are not forgotten."

Upon Father Whalen's "exit from the classroom" in the spring of 1993, Jared Morris' article in the St. Thomas' student newspaper also quoted Dr. Dennis in regard to the media ethics seminar and journalism education. Dr. Dennis said that Father Whalen is "known as 'Mr. Ethics' because he brings together a deep concern for the performance of journalists and the content of what they produce." In the same article, Dr. Connery, who succeeded Father Whalen as head of the Department of Journalism, said that the department is "grounded in values," and that is "the Whalen legacy," which resulted from Father Whalen's vision throughout his years at St. Thomas.

Father Whalen, writing in a booklet sent to journalism alumni upon the occasion of the department's 25th anniversary, referred to the results of a survey mailed to alumni. The basic skills courses in writing, reporting and editing were of the most immediate values upon graduation, but the media ethics course was the "overwhelming response" for the course with the most lasting value. Ten years later, in a booklet sent to alumni when the Journalism Department celebrated its 35th anniversary, Father Whalen no longer was teaching, but ethics were still a great concern to him. He said that when he sees or hears the media "tinkering with ethics," he would like to walk into a classroom and ask, "Well?" He also wondered what alums of the media ethics seminar would think of "the current bottom line mentality in the media, which proudly asks what kind of news do we want to read about or hear about or watch?"

During the past academic year (1994-95), the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, as have other departments at St. Thomas, has been concerned with "outcomes assessment" that has been mandated by our administration as ordered by the regional accrediting agency. The six full-time members of the Journalism Department each came up with goals, which totaled 40 to 50. These were then discussed at departmental meetings. There was much redundancy, but collectively the goals coalesced around these two points: 1) the writing and editing skills needed on the job — the Journalism Department has concentrations in print, broadcasting, public relations and advertising — and 2) the ability to critically evaluate ethical issues in mass communication. The latter is where the Catholic dimension plays a significant role. As stated in St. Thomas' "Convictions," the Catholic tradition fosters a values-oriented education. The reference to "values" is echoed in the Journalism Department's Mission Statement. The department's faculty members do not have an "official" departmental line to follow; rather, each person, whether Roman Catholic or not, serves as a role model for responsible and ethical conduct as a professional in the field.