

# SYLLABUS

Journalism 373

The Ethics of Television Journalism

*four units*

## **Instructor:**

Howard Rosenberg, former television critic for the Los Angeles Times. While in graduate school, I was editor of the weekly White Bear Press near St. Paul, Minn., starting my meteoric rise by engaging in such unethical practices as running editorials and news stories written by others without attribution—that’s plagiarism, by the way—and promising news stories about local businesses (free advertisements, in other words) if those businesses would buy ads. Talk about having no clue about ethics. Thereafter, I was a reporter for the Moline (Ill.) Dispatch and the Louisville (Ky.) Times, covering politics and government, ultimately being named TV critic there before joining the Los Angeles Times in that capacity in 1978 and becoming fabulously famous and successful during the next 25 years.

And yes, my voice is always this raspy.

## **Course Description and Purpose:**

This course—meeting 2-5:20 p.m. Mondays in ASC 231—will introduce ethical issues arising from television (and print) journalism in the last 50-60 years. The major issue of whether news anchors should have their faces done, teeth whitened, breasts enlarged or bodies liposuctioned will not be addressed. Nor will their inclination (locally) to trumpet “team coverage” and “This just in!!!!!!” when reporting that Ulysses S. Grant, the nation’s 18<sup>th</sup> president, is buried in Grant’s Tomb.

Come to think of it, aren't such gimmicks or tricks—along with relentless advertising of **LIVE!!!!**—a form of theater, employed exclusively to snare viewers, and if so, unethical in themselves? So maybe we *should* ponder them after all.

Meanwhile, students will identify and evaluate the moral dilemmas found in television journalism (most of which apply also to print, radio and the internet) and use these ethical questions to prepare themselves for dealing with similar ethical issues in their personal, academic and eventual professional lives.

In exploring specific decisions in the reporting of news events, and on what basis these decisions were made, students will be able to examine the ethical values of those who work in all areas of journalism and determine how the ethics of the profession dominate what events are covered and are not covered, how they are covered and why they are covered.

Why is this significant?

No. 1, because some or you undoubtedly will become television, radio, internet or print journalists.

No. 2, and more importantly, the way media cover both the seminal and even inconsequential events of our time (often not distinguishing one from the other) influences the way the public perceives the world and the way we, as a society, think and behave. Evaluating journalists from an ethical perspective gives us a better framework in which to assess what they do and decide for ourselves if some or most of them are the dishonest, self-serving, radical left-wing slugs that their critics say they are.

Rarely are decisions made in ethical or moral vacuums. This class will examine the processes by which certain decisions are made, and the impact of those decisions on the public. Thus, it will define the ethical mission of

television journalists (which applies also to print and the Internet) and determine whether they are living up to the ethical ideal of doing the right thing for the right reasons.

What *is* the right thing? Good question. If you don't have at least a vague idea by the end of the semester, then we'll all be in trouble.

Are their absolutes? Not always. In that regard, gray areas and other ethical dilemmas will be explored as part of a discussion of when, if ever, the ends justify the means and of the moral implications of such decisions made by journalists.

### **Required Reading:**

There is no text, but students may be assigned mandatory readings that will be handed out in class. These may be the basis for class discussions, and thus, to some degree, will have an impact on students' grades. In other words, in case I am not being clear and you're not getting the drift: READ THEM!

### **Grading:**

1. Students will be assigned three papers of six pages in length worth a total of 60% of the course grade. No crayons. These papers *must be typewritten and double spaced*. Papers that do not conform to this format will not—will *not*—be accepted. No exceptions. Late papers will be marked down one letter grade for each week of tardiness, the “week” starting immediately after class on the due date. For example, turn in a paper after 5:20 p.m. on the day it is due, and you're a week late; you're toast. No exceptions.

2. A comprehensive final exam—embracing **all** issues raised during the **entire** course—will count 30% of the grade.

3. Class participation—without me having to pry it from you—will determine the other 10% of the grade. This 10% can affect borderline grades, possibly elevating a “B-” to a “B,” for example, or lowering a “B” to a “B-.” So even if you’re timid or speak in a hillbilly dialect you prefer not sharing, it still will benefit you to speak up in class. Remember: Your insights and opinions are as valid as anyone else’s.

### **Plagiarism:**

It will not be tolerated. This does not mean that you cannot be influenced by the words and thoughts of others and distill them into a point of view or hypothesis that you express in your own words. That’s how the intellectual process works. But stealing word for word—or something even fairly close to it—is absolutely forbidden. Discoveries of plagiarism have damaged and even destroyed careers of journalists at major newspapers in recent years. A similar fate has befallen several noted scholars whose non-fiction books were found to have included chunks of unattributed material from other books. So...plagiarize even once in this class and your *course* grade will be “F.” That’s USC policy, and I endorse it.

### **Class Attendance:**

It is essential. In other words: **mandatory!!!!!!** Which means? You must attend class. Heed this:

*Two unexcused absences* will result in a single letter-grade deduction in the final grade. *Three unexcused absences* will result in a deduction of two letter grades, *four unexcused absences* a deduction of three letter

grades—that is if you have any grade left from which to deduct. *Five unexcused absences?* You flunk the course, even if you’ve done “A” work.

**Tardiness also will be judged harshly!!!!!!** So be on time. Class begins at 2 p.m., not 2:06, 2:12, 2:30 or whenever you feel like breezing in. My drive to USC is 40 miles—through hostile territory, no less. If I can be here on time, so can you. Job or activity conflicts are *not* valid excuses for tardiness. Nor are attacks by terrorists. So...

*If you are habitually late—however brilliant you may be—your final course grade will be reduced a ½-letter grade. ‘Habitually’ will be subject to my interpretation.*

Alternative class viewing assignments will not—hear this, will *not*—be made without evidence of a valid excuse for an absence. A warning: I am not easily moved by sob stories. In the case of illness, **only a doctor’s note is valid evidence**. You know, a doctor with a medical degree, not a note from Dr. Phil.

### **Office Hours:**

What office? I have no office or regular office hours on campus. However, I am available on campus by appointment before and after class Mondays, and on a daily basis can be reached daytime or nighttime at my home, where I do keep an office.

**This Just In!!!!!!** My phone number is 818-706-8583, my fax 818-706-7601, my e-mail [hdsnbrg@yahoo.com](mailto:hdsnbrg@yahoo.com).

Do not be shy. Do not be inhibited. Do not be intimidated. Do not be terrified. All right, be a little terrified, but...**I am always accessible to you.**

I cannot stress this enough. I want to hear from you about anything you want to discuss, positive or negative. I am a very good listener. You will

not be interrupting me. If you have a question or a worry, or if you want to schmooze, call. If you want to bitch about something, that's all right, too. We'll talk it through—LIVE!!!!!!

## WEEKLY SCHEDULE

### Week 1: Introduction, Jan. 14

Review the syllabus and course requirements. Define news. Define ethics. Discuss the Golden Rule's application to journalism ethics, the areas of ethical theory applicable to journalists and where personal and professional ethics intersect.

Discuss: (1) How the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment justifiably provides a wide umbrella of protection for journalists. (2) When legal rights and ethical rights may be in conflict. Just because we have the legal right to do something, doesn't necessarily mean we have the ethical right. Remember that. I will repeat it often. (3) A press that screws up is the price we pay for a press that's free. I'd call that a bargain.

Screen "'Edward R. Murrow: This Reporter,' Anchorwoman" and coverage of the New Hampshire Primary.

### Week 2: USC holiday. No class meeting, Jan. 21

### Week 3: Lying and Deception, Jan. 28

**Jan. 28:** For historical perspective, screen and discuss "Newsreels to Nightly News: A History," which traces video news deceptiveness and entertainment roots to early motion pictures more than a century ago.

### Weeks 4-5: Lying and Deception. Feb. 4/11

**Feb. 4:** Big Lies/Small Lies. Define varieties of media deception and misrepresentation, from cross-promotion to using news to glorify the

messenger. Define three components of The Big Lie. Supported by clips, discuss the many ways TV news routinely fibs in small ways.

Discuss when hidden cameras and other electronic devices are proper and improper. Discuss the tactics of using them, including those of Joel Grover, who exposed unsanitary restaurant conditions in Los Angeles. Discuss the ABC/Food Lion case in which a jury found ABC News guilty of criminal trespass and fraud in connection with planting operatives and hidden cameras inside a food store chain suspected of selling dangerously contaminated products. Are these cases of ends justifying the means?

Screen and discuss the implications of the movie, “Absence of Malice,” regarding libel and the “dumb defense.”

**Feb. 11:** A survey found that 21% of Americans between the ages of 19 and 28 made Comedy Central’s “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart” their primary election news source for the 2004 presidential campaign. Is there much difference between satirical news and real news? Screen “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart” for comparison with conventional news programs.

Supported by clips from the Fox News Channel, CNN’s “Lou Dobbs Tonight” and other examples, discuss the blurring of news and opinion by TV journalists, which is becoming a growth industry.

Discuss TV’s celebration of the messenger and how other media buy into it. Screen Larry King’s interview of CNN anchor Anderson Cooper and discuss the marketing of Cooper and new CBS News anchor Katie Couric.

Discuss the ethical implications of word choice.

Assign paper #1, due Feb. 18.

Week 6-7: Conflict of Interest, Feb. 18/25

**Feb. 18:** Paper #1 due. When, if ever, is it ethical for journalists to promote a point of view? Is wearing a flag lapel pin promoting a point of view? Discuss also if journalists owe their first allegiance to their profession or to their country? To their company and its interests or to their craft or some higher entity?

Screen “The Death of Kevin Carter.”

Also discuss the bottomless pit of synergy in an increasingly incestuous media corporate world where consolidation reigns and more and more media influence is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, potentially skewing news coverage.

**Feb. 25:** Discuss coverage of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq and the embedding of reporters. Screen and discuss “War Spin: Jessica Lynch.”

Weeks 8-9: Privacy, March 3/10

**March 3:** Screen “War Photographer” and local news tapes pertaining to possible exploitation.

Screen “LAPD: Life on the Beat” and discuss if the dead have privacy rights.

**March 10:** Discuss conflicts between personal privacy and the public’s right to know, including broadcast of 911 calls and the issue of whether to identify alleged victims of rape and sexual abuse that surfaced in the Kobe Bryant and other cases. Is this a double standard, and if so, what are the implications? In other words, is it proper for media to make public the names of criminal suspects when they protect the identities of their

accusers? When you accuse me of rape or sexual abuse, my name becomes a headline; yours is not revealed. Is that fair? And does withholding names of alleged victims extend a stigma by implying that victims are somehow at fault and should feel shame? Discuss the William Kennedy Smith case in this regard, and the “blue dotting” of his accuser.

Also, does the end ever justify the means in privacy matters? Do celebrities have rights of privacy? Discuss the Arthur Ashe and Linda Ellerbee cases in this regard, and also lessons learned—or not learned—from the Richard Jewell/Olympic Park bombing case in 1996.

Week 10: USC holiday. No class meeting, March 17

Week 11: Privacy, March 24

**March 24:** When, if ever, does the people’s right to know supersede a president’s or a presidential candidate’s privacy? Or do such people have no right to privacy, none at all? Discuss the undisclosed wheelchair disability of President Roosevelt and screen portion of HBO movie, “Warm Springs.” Discuss the extra-marital adventures of Presidents Kennedy and Clinton and presidential candidate Gary Hart. Also discuss interest in the sexual orientation of Vice-President Dick Cheney’s daughter and the sexual orientation of Idaho Sen. Larry “Wide Stance” Craig.

Assign paper #2, due March 31.

Weeks 12-13: Anonymous Sources, March 31/April 7.

**March 31:** Paper #2 due. Reporters and their sources—Is using anonymous sources unethical or a necessity of doing business as a

journalist? Is it ever proper to disclose the identity of an anonymous source? Discuss the decision of “Dear Abby” writer Jeannie Phillips to disclose to police the identity of a potentially dangerous pedophile who had written her anonymously.

Screen “All the President’s Men.”

**April 7:** Discuss “All the President’s Men” and controversy surrounding the disclosure of Deep Throat’s identity. Should anonymity be granted to sources who are certified jerks if they have worthwhile information or only to nice persons with noble motives?

Discuss the Valerie Plame/Matt Cooper/Judith Miller case as it relates to Bush alter ego Karl Rove and former Cheney chief-of-staff Scooter Libby.

Week 14: News, Talk Radio, the Blogosphere, April 14.

**April 14:** The news business is changing dramatically, and as always technology is zooming ahead faster than our ability to harness and direct it. News and information are on such a swift track now that we, as a society, no longer have time to think. Hence, the danger of government and its citizens making knee-jerk decisions, based on erroneous information, that can have dire, even devastating consequences. In that regard, should the internet be guided by ethical standards that govern other media?

Assign paper #3, due April 21

Weeks 15-16: Fair Trial, April 21/28

**April 21:** Paper # 3 due. Discuss such “Trials of the Century” as the Lindbergh/Bruno Hauptmann, Rodney King, Menendez brothers, O.J.

Simpson, Scott Peterson and Michael Jackson epics. Discuss the Kobe Bryant case. Discuss consequences of media emphasis on celebrity news.

Screen “The O.J. Verdict.”

*April 28:* Do cameras belong inside a courtroom? Ever? Do cameras belong inside an execution chamber? Ever? What about televising sessions of state and U.S. Supreme Courts? Discuss “Court TV” and media-induced courtroom theater. Screen episodes of “Crime and Punishment” and “The Law Firm.”

Discuss the McMartin case regarding alleged sexual abuse of children at a daycare center—later proved untrue—and the media circus that helped fuel the case and ruin innocent lives.

Examine the impact of checkbook journalism on trials relating to the William Kennedy Smith proceeding and others.

Review for final exam.

