

COMMUNICATION 3404
Media Ethics and The Law

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Office Hours: Virtual and Phone by Appointment

Classroom: JR360

Course Overview

At its core, this course will review the media's role in a constantly evolving world and the ethical decisions journalists and publishers face on a day-to-day basis. We will review historic approaches to a variety of ethical quandaries as well as the legal developments over time, and along the way, we will try to answer a few core questions:

- What are the core legal rules and issues that media members need to be familiar with?
- What are the functional differences between legal and ethical rules/requirements?
- Should media members have a strict code of ethics and who would have to follow it?
- Does/should the media have any specific obligation to ethical behavior that ordinary citizens do not?
- What even qualifies as 'the media' in a landscape that includes everything from the New York Times and Fox News to YouTube influencers, Twitter, and TikTok?
- To what extent should/do media purveyors consider financial obligations or social pressure?

Text

We will be utilizing the Society for Professional Journalists Guide for Professional Conduct in conjunction with weekly videos and online news stories and analysis. Additional online reading will be available through Carmen.

Media Ethics – A Guide for Professional Conduct, 5th Edition

Revised by Fred Brown and members of the Society of Professional Journalists' Ethics Committee

Attendance

This course will meet weekly in class Monday evenings and has a mandatory attendance policy. The readings and assignments in this class are meant to supplement our in-class discussions. If you are not present, you will miss out on the majority of what this class is intended to offer. Worse still, your voice and your ideas will not be included in our discussions. Each student is allowed one unexcused absence. Any further absences must be excused for acceptable reasons.

Those reasons include university-sanctioned athletic or academic events, extended illness, religious observance, or familial or other emergencies.

Each class will meet for two hours in-person and then will be supplemented with weekly news articles and videos in addition to reading from the text. Each week there will also be discussion topics posted on Carmen, which are more thoroughly described in the Grading and Assignments section.

Class Schedule/Outline

The calendar below provides a general outline for our progression through the various topics we will cover. Given the dynamic nature of the media world around us, however, we may need to make modifications so that we can appropriately cover breaking or significant news as it develops during the semester. As changes occur, I will provide updates regarding modifications to our schedule.

Date	Topic
1/6/2025	Online Class – Overview of Subject Matter & Syllabus
1/13/2025	Intro to Media – The Power and Responsibility of Information and Storytelling
1/20/2025	No Class – Martin Luther King Day
1/27/2025	Newsworthiness, Transparency, & Objectivity
2/3/2025	The Law vs. Ethics
2/10/2025	First Amendment, Secrecy, & Public’s Right to Know
2/17/2025	Accuracy, Defamation, & Liability
2/24/2025	Public vs. Private Information
3/3/2025	Privileges, Sources, & Conflicts (Final Paper Discussion)
3/10/2025	No Class – Spring Break
3/17/2025	The Financial & Social World of Media
3/24/2025	Social Media, the Internet, and the Press
3/31/2025	Misinformation, Deception, & Conspiracy Theories,
4/7/2025	Investigative vs. Beat Journalism
4/14/2025	Reporting Through Difficult Issues – War, Terrorism, Shootings, & Pandemics.
4/21/2025	Final Day Wrap Up

Grading & Assignments

Grading for this class will be based on three overall categories - outlet update assignments, community discussions on carmen, and a final paper (percentages outlined below).

Outlet Updates

These brief papers will be due every other week and will be based on your choice of two different press outlets that each cover the same basic topic(s). You will be expected to monitor both outlets from week to week over the course of the semester and to note the differences in how they cover specific topics/stories.

By Jan. 27 you will need to turn in an initial paper indicating what outlets you have chosen. That paper should be roughly 600 to 1,000 pages in length and will cover why you chose those outlets.

One week after the initial assignment and continuing every two weeks after that on the same days as our class (see chart below) you will need to turn in your outlet updates. The papers should roughly be 600-800 words in length and should compare how your chosen outlets covered a specific story/event. You will be able to turn those papers in through the carmen assignment system.

Outlet Assignment Due Dates	
First Outlet Assignment	1/27/25
Second Outlet Assignment	2/3/25
Third Outlet Assignment	2/17/25
Fourth Outlet Assignment	3/3/25
Fifth Outlet Assignment	3/17/25
Sixth Outlet Assignment	3/31/25
Seventh Outlet Assignment	4/14/25

Carmen Community Discussions

To supplement our in-class work, we will be using the carmen 'discussions' panel. Each week I will be posting a new discussion section to cover that week's topics. In that section students can add questions, comments, or links to additional information they find that they believe is relevant. Over the course of the semester, students are expected to engage in at least 14 total discussions to earn full credit.

It is possible to earn extra credit through this process as well. A total of 10 total percentage points of extra credit is available through additional comments in our online discussions. Each additional comment/addition beyond the required 14 will count as half of a percentage points. If you are looking to obtain all the possible points for the semester, that means 34 total comments/additions.

Each discussion section will remain accessible for two weeks after the designated class period to allow everyone to go back with new ideas or questions based on subsequent reading.

Final Paper

The final paper will each be a minimum of ten pages in length (double-spaced) and will answer your choice of two out of several possible questions. The topic and specific questions for the final paper will be provided during our March 3, 2025, class.

Total Class Credits/Grading	
Outlet Updates	35%
Community Discussions	35%
Final Paper	30%
Total	100%
Extra Credit	10%

Classroom Etiquette and Expectations The following ground rules have been developed out of respect for both the students and the instructors in this class.

- Coming to class on time: Coming to class late interrupts the flow of our discussions and distracts the rest of the class. You are expected to come on time and be attentive when class begins. If you must be late for a legitimate reason, please inform me in advance.
- Once class starts: Put away any distractions. Although you are not expected to be completely silent during the class, you are expected to keep your thoughts on the subject and your comments at least related to the topic.
- Leaving early: If you must leave early for a legitimate reason, please let me know in advance.
- Other electronic equipment: Texting is not allowed during class time. Cell phones should be turned off or set to silent.

In addition to these rules, by taking this class you also agree to the following terms with respect to our interactions with others:

- We agree to treat everyone with respect, civility and fairness;
- We agree to treat everyone without bias based on age, gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, disability, or sexual orientation;
- We agree to treat everyone courteously and with a goal toward resolving any conflict in a non-threatening and constructive manner;
- We agree to be prepared and to offer our best effort regarding the discussion and presentation on any topics covered in the class;
- We agree to always analyze and offer the most reasonable argument we can think of that goes against our own feelings or intuition on a topic.

School of Communication and University Policies

Academic Misconduct: Cheating and plagiarism in any form will not be tolerated. The Ohio State University's Code of Student Conduct (Section 3325-23-04) defines academic misconduct as "any activity that tends to compromise the academic integrity of the University or subvert the educational process" (p. 2). Examples of academic misconduct include, but are not limited to, plagiarism, collusion (unauthorized collaboration), copying the work of another student, and possession of unauthorized materials during an examination.

It is the responsibility of the Committee on Academic Misconduct to investigate or establish procedures for the investigation of all reported cases of student academic misconduct. The term "academic misconduct" includes all forms of student academic misconduct wherever committed; illustrated by, but not limited to, cases of plagiarism and dishonest practices in connection with examinations. Instructors shall report all instances of alleged academic misconduct to the committee (Faculty Rule 3335-5-487). For additional information, see the Code of Student Conduct <http://studentlife.osu.edu/csc/> ([Links to an external site.](#)).

If I suspect that a student has committed academic misconduct in this course, I am obligated by University Rules to report my suspicions to the Committee on Academic Misconduct (COAM). If COAM determines you have violated the University's Code of Student Conduct, the sanctions for the misconduct could include a failing grade in this course and suspension or dismissal from the University. If you have any questions about this policy or what constitutes academic misconduct, please contact me or visit <http://oaa.osu.edu/coam/home.html>.

Written and oral assignments: Your written and oral assignments should be your own original work. In formal assignments, you should follow APA style to cite the ideas and words of your research sources. Any time you use the words of others, this must be indicated as a direct quotation with a citation to the source and page number(s), using APA style to clearly indicate the words in the direct quote. To use the words of others while providing a citation, but without indicating that there is a direct quote from the cited work, still is plagiarism. Simply changing a few words from a source does not make the words your own, and such use can also be considered plagiarism. You are encouraged to ask a trusted person to proofread your assignments before you turn them in--but no one else should revise or rewrite your work.

Reusing past work: In general, you are prohibited in university courses from turning in work from a past class to your current class, even if you modify it. If you want to build on past research or revisit a topic you've explored in previous courses, please discuss the situation with me.

Copyright Disclaimer

The materials used in connection with this course may be subject to copyright protection and are only for the use of students officially enrolled in the course for the educational purposes associated with the course. Copyright law must be considered before copying, retaining, or disseminating materials outside of the course.

Diversity: The School of Communication at The Ohio State University embraces and maintains an environment that respects diverse traditions, heritages, experiences, and people. Our commitment to diversity moves beyond mere tolerance to recognizing, understanding, and welcoming the contributions of diverse groups and the value group members possess as individuals. In our School, the faculty, students, and staff are dedicated to building a tradition of diversity with principles of equal opportunity, personal respect, and the intellectual interests of those who comprise diverse cultures.

Title IX: Title IX makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender are Civil Rights offenses subject to the same kinds of accountability and the same kinds of support applied to offenses against other protected categories (e.g., race). If you or someone you know has been sexually harassed or assaulted, you may find the appropriate resources at <http://titleix.osu.edu> or by contacting the Ohio State Title IX Coordinator, Kellie Brennan, at titleix@osu.edu

Student Academic Services: Arts and Sciences Advising and Academic Services' website provides support for student academic success. Information on advising issues such as tutoring, transfer credits, academic standing, and contact information for Arts and Sciences advisors can be obtained through this website: <http://advising.osu.edu/welcome.shtml> ([Links to an external site.](#))

Student Services: The Student Service Center assists with financial aid matters, tuition and fee payments. Please see their site at: <http://ssc.osu.edu> Writing Center: All students, especially those who have difficulty writing, are encouraged to visit the OSU

Writing Center. Their web address is <https://cstw.osu.edu/writing-center> and their phone number is 688-5865.

Accessibility Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

REQUESTING ACCOMMODATIONS The University strives to make all learning experiences as accessible as possible. If you anticipate or experience academic barriers based on your disability (including mental health, chronic or temporary medical conditions), please let me know via email immediately so that we can privately discuss options. You are also welcome to register with Student Life Disability Services to establish reasonable accommodations. After registration, make arrangements with me as soon as possible to discuss your accommodations so that they may be implemented in a timely fashion. SLDS contact information: slds@osu.edu ; 614-292-3307; slds.osu.edu ; 098 Baker Hall, 113 W. 12th Avenue.

DISCLAIMER The information provided in this syllabus constitutes a list of basic class policies. I reserve the right to modify this information when deemed necessary for any reason. You will be notified in class, via email, and/or on Carmen if and when any changes occur.