Media Ethics Between Iraq and a Hard Place

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A conference on general semantics, especially one titled "Confronting the Challenges of Conflicting World Views," provides an opportune moment to talk shop about the semantics and ethics of the War in Iraq, with special attention on behaviors of journalists and public relations practitioners and how media critics might improve their criticism and discourse about those issues.

What seems to be going on "in the world out there," in media-land? What are journalists and PR practitioners up to in their efforts to gather, report, and/or manipulate and package information about the War in Iraq? What trends, if any, can we note in the media-public nexus since 9/11? How can news media practitioners, mere mortals that they are, process and gate-keep information professionally, objectively, and ethically during times of such high international dudgeon, and how can public relations practitioners operate effectively and ethically in the same environment? How do we, as faculty and students and scholars, filter these images and trends through our own systems of values? And then, how do we ethically and responsibly "teach" this stuff, when we ourselves are very likely to be burdened by strong (and perhaps unexamined) prejudices and when we have been granted the awesome power of the classroom lectern?

Let's explore some of these issues via a case study. The natural laboratory I want to take you to is my Monday night "Ethics Across the Professions" class in late March, 2003. In that course are 45 students, about half from Interdisciplinary Social Sciences and half from Journalism and Media Studies. This week we were concentrating on media ethics; we've already worked on ethics of leadership, health care, business, law, and education, and we've participated in a three-day international conference on professional ethics. So by now the students are reasonably sophisticated about professional power, codes of ethics, conflicts of interest, the nature of truth telling and harm and independence and accountability, etc. They're fairly good at systematic moral reasoning, and can use a variety of ethical decision-making models to think their way through sticky dilemmas. So we should have every reason to expect a discussion of media ethics to proceed at the rational, principled level, right?

Guess again. Not unlike every casual, street-corner, water-cooler, barber-shop conversation any of us have had about media ethics with everyday "ordinary" folks, Monday night's class quickly degenerated to (or should I say "emerged from") the visceral level of discourse. The claims and counterclaims constituted what we might call "moralizing," as distinguished from "moral philosophy." Such moralizing seems to be informed by prejudice, by selective information, by the syndrome Lewis Carroll described as "'First the sentence and then the evidence,' cried the Queen." In short, it seemed to be a routine discussion about media

ethics!

What were the topics brought up, and how were they dealt with? Well, Peter Arnett for one. The NBC/MSNBC/*National Geographic* reporter stationed in Baghdad, who was interviewed on Iraqi television, had called the US war effort a failure, and was soundly chastised and fired for crossing the Maginot line that separates reporter and activist. Students, citing unnamed sources of rumor (including, of course, the ubiquitous internet) said that Geraldo Rivera had also been kicked out of Iraq for having revealed US troop movements. (Of course, we had not yet seen the Tuesday, April 1, stories in which Geraldo denied he was being removed from the war zone and blamed the rumors on "rats" at NBC news, his former employer, and "the pack of lies" from MSNBC, which he referred to as "so pathetic a cable news network that they have to do everything they can to attract attention." That would have been grist for the media ethics mill the other night; it will have to wait a week, by which time the world would have learned that Geraldo indeed had been booted out of Iraq for sketching troop movements in the sand.)

On another topic, the students got in a tizzy over front page photos of a downed US helicopter on one day and of American prisoners of war on another last week. This was seen by some as the liberal media's bias against the war effort. (Some did note that after a flurry of jingoistic letters to the editor opposing such coverage, the liberal but not commercially insensitive *St. Petersburg Times* atoned for its "error" by splashing a huge page one photo of a GI carrying a wounded Iraqi soldier one day, and, the next day, a US military doctor cradling an Iraqi infant. Some seemed to think that was a blatant sell-out on the part of the paper. Others thought it was just common sense.) But those photos of the American prisoners of war, and especially the Al-Jazeera's gruesome footage of US casualties, raised the most ire. How could any international media be so insensitive, and how could any domestic media report on casualties before knowing whether the families of American soldiers had been notified? And then, when families had been notified, why would any responsible journalists shove cameras in their face? Have these people no sense of decency, or privacy?

Another topic the students argued about: Embedded journalists—reporters and photographers riding along with, protected by, and inevitably allied with US troops. They give us great insights to the war, insights lacking in the military-controlled Persian Gulf War of a decade ago, said some of the students. (Some were particularly excited about the incredible new portable technology that brings the war home to us instantaneously in living color, but not everyone saw this as serving society in any meaningful way.) Others countered with claims that there's no way a journalist this beholden to anyone for food, clothing, shelter, transportation, safety and a daily ration of news could do anything other than lose professional objectivity and reflect a sort of "Journalistic Stockholm Syndrone." The Pentagon has created as much control over this decade's press as it did in 1991, but is a lot smarter about how it controls us, some of the students said. (As you might suspect, the students majoring in journalism and those majoring in public relations did not see eye to eye on this.)

Speaking of the loss of objectivity and the PR "machine," it was noted that liberals opposed to the war are angry not just at President Bush, but also at the news media; they say the media have not been aggressive enough in challenging the bellicose agenda of Bush, Rumsfeld, Ashcroft and Company. And they note that conservative radio talk show hosts and Rupert Murdoch's FOX network are leading the jingoistic rallies in support of the war, drowning out any opposition media. The discussion spontaneously back-pedaled to 9/11, with the attendant concerns about journalists' patriotism or lack thereof, of flag-waving and sloganeering, of creating and blindly deferring to mass hysteria, anti-Middle East prejudice, and then nationalistic group think—topics that inevitably stir the loins.

And so it went. A class of rational thinkers regressed to visceral and anecdotal discourse.

Is anything wrong with this picture? Should we expect more of our students-cum-citizens, or of our media practitioners-in-waiting, of our ethics students?

We might accuse them of being knuckle-dragging, mouth-breathing, moral troglodytes (I have to thank one of my students for coining this phrase). But that would be short-sighted and unfair, and make us vulnerable to accusations that we're pointy-headed liberal professors. Rather, I believe the students' passion speaks to the importance of understanding media in the political/economic/societal matrix, and the significance (and concomitant difficulty) of grappling with media ethics *vis a vis* general social ethics and applied professional ethics and values.

In retrospect it seems to me that my students, in their animated discussion, were engaging in some essential components of learning and doing ethics. Indeed, they all seemed to be reflecting at least two, if not four, of the five course objectives listed on my syllabus. (The syllabus draws from the Hastings Center, Institute of Society, Ethics, and Life Science, which listed five instructional goals appropriate to any ethics course). At the very least, the discussion revealed the 1) recognition of moral issues and the 2) stimulation of the moral imagination. For some students, the discussion also seemed to 3) elicit a sense of moral obligation and personal responsibility; occasionally, there was evidence of 4) tolerating and resisting disagreement and moral ambiguity.

The fifth objective, the development of analytical skills for the systematic evaluation of moral dilemmas, had been the focus of much of the semester's early work. Ironically (or was it so ironic?), the viscerally engaging subject *du jour* seemed to result in the students' bypassing the rigorous logic of objective decision-making while they were engaged in recognizing issues/stimulating moral imagination/eliciting a sense of moral obligation/tolerating moral ambiguity.

My job, as a strong believer in the "teachable moment," was to devote class time to help them momentarily pull back from the heat of the debate and systematically work through some of the issues and dilemmas—to bring light to the heat. In reality, all we could get to this week were a couple of the dilemmas. It could take a whole semester just to untangle the issues the class raised, but that's the fun of teaching ethics: We <u>do</u> have an entire semester, in an intellectually safe and nurturing classroom, to do our thinking and caring, to learn how to front-load our decisions so that once we do get out there in the "real world" we're armed and ready to think and act as moral agents. (Maybe that's one benefit the "academic perspective" offers that is not likely to arise from the disconnected snippits, war stories, and moralizing expressed by many of the professionals/practitioners who speak to our classes and to the world at large via their mass media. That academic perspective forces us to transcend—or at least temporarily postpone—prejudice.)

How did I help my students do the necessary work, and how does what I did with them relate to broader questions of media ethics, values, and semantics?

For one thing, we did some meta-analysis, by noting the need to bear in mind the values, principles, loyalties, professional roles, stages of moral development—and the necessity of having enough information to make informed decisions—reflected throughout our processing of the cases. Each variable can be applied to almost any case study; collectively, they constitute lenses needed to "do ethics" thoroughly and effectively.

Then I shared with them the 1996 code of ethics of the world's largest organization of journalists, the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), and had them frame their discussion in accordance with its four fundamental principles of journalistic practice: 1) to seek truth and to report it; 2) to minimize harm; 3) to act independently; and 4) to be accountable. We looked at each in turn, noti ng that in seeking truth and reporting it journalists attempt to be honest, fair and

courageous in gathering, interpreting, and distributing information; that in minimizing harm ethical journalists try to treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings inherently deserving of respect; that in acting independently journalists try to be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know, and that in being accountable journalists are responsive to legitimate moral claims made by their readers, listeners, viewers, and each other.

We quickly pointed out that the four guiding principles are intended to work in tandem rather than in isolation, that any given ethical dilemma probably entails a balancing act between or among two or more of the principles in a sort of "right versus right" configuration. (We're obligated to Rushworth Kidder's highly readable text, *How Good People Make Tough Choices,* for the "right versus right" paradigm.) How much truth can and should be sought, and how much harm permitted to occur? How much independence can or should journalists have, and how accountable (and to whom) should they be?

Consider what happens when we polarize the constructs. We end up visualizing the journalistic enterprise as either a search for truth or an avoidance of harm, or as either unbridled independence or absolute accountability. In doing so we end up in a mental bind wherein we think we have to tell the raw truth at all costs, even if it means the invasion of someone's privacy; or, *vice versa*, that we have to avoid inflicting any discomfort or harm even if it means important truths go untold; meanwhile, we either operate as though the First Amendment guarantees us total independence from government and all other institutions and individual power brokers [a naive interpretation, one too often unexamined in media circles], so we should not hold ourselves accountable nor permit anyone else to do so; or, *vice versa*, we are so conscious of being accountable to any and all that we lose needed autonomy and the capacity for independent thinking. Such are is the consequence of polarizing SPJ's four guiding principles.

I encourage my students—and any professionals who care to unravel the problem and lay audiences who want to better understand it—to reconfigure all four of the constructs as achievable ideals, wherein we seek to maximize truth-telling significant stories the public needs in order to self-govern, while minimizing harm to sources, subjects, and our audiences; and likewise, to maximize independence from forces that would corrupt the enterprise while simultaneously demonstrating accountability to the moral agents who have the right to ask journalists for a reckoning. Reconfiguring the constructs along horizontal and vertizal axes, rather than a polar opposites, essentially frees us to do ethics in journalism.

Basically, then, what we see in the code of ethics for journalists is an appeal to moral reasoning rather than an appeal to convention or *ad hoc* moralizing. The code does not simplistically resolve the dilemmas, but frames them and challenges us to use individual decision-making skills on the task at hand. Thus viewed, the discussions of case studies and practice of journalism become more nuanced and morally enlightened.

Meanwhile, many of the discussions about media performance post-9/11 , in particular the current war in Iraq, entail propaganda battles between news media and the Pentagon, or between journalists and agents of persuasion and special interest. Therefore, it was deemed helpful to enrichen those discussions with insights from the world of public relations.

Just as the discussions of news media's search for ethical performance were informed by the SPJ Code of Ethics, so were discussions of public relations informed by looking at the code of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). In 2000 PRSA adopted an entirely new code of ethics intended to be aspirational and educational rather than punitive. PRSA's earlier prohibitions against misbehavior have been replaced with positive, affirmative moral obligations. The emphasis is on "responsible advocacy."

To be professionally ethical, PR practitioners are asked by their code to embody a half dozen core values: 1) advocacy; 2) honesty; 3) expertise; 4) independence; 5) loyalty, and 6)

fairness. Based on these values, the code calls for awareness of:

1) the free flow of information ("protecting and advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential to serving the public interest and contributing to informed decision making in a democratic society");

2) competition ("promoting healthy and fair competition among professionals preserves an ethical climate while fostering a robust business environment");

3) disclosure of information ("open communication fosters informed decision making in a democratic society");

4) safeguarding confidences ("client trust requires appropriate protection of confidential and private information");

5) conflicts of interest ("avoiding real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest builds the trust of clients, employers, and the publics"); and

6) enhancing the profession ("public relations professionals work constantly to strengthen the public's trust in the pr ofession").

A pocket guide to the PRSA code offers practitioners a reasonably sensible "ethics decision making guide" or justification model. It says that to do ethics in PR, one should:

1) define the specific ethical issues and/or conflict;

2) identify internal and external factors (e.g., legal, political, social, economic) that may influence the decision;

3) identify key values;

4) identify the parties who will be affected by the decision and define the public relations professional's obligation to each;

5) select ethical principles to guide the decision making process; and

6) make a decision and justify.

This six step process aligns closely with any number of ethical decision-making models to be found in the fields of applied professional ethics. What makes it stand out is the fact that is affixed to the code, as a guide to daily practice in public relations, rather than buried in a textbook or scholarly journal (where academics inclined toward esoterica look for professional ethics models).

There are obvious and philosophically significant differences between the four-point SPJ code and the triple six-pack PRSA code, differences that enliven discussions about news/information distribution and public relations/advocacy. This should not surprise us, given that there are distinctions between the professional roles and moral duties of the two types of communicators. Despite the similarity of key terms (especially the truthtelling mandate and the call for the free flow of information and the avoidance of conflicts of interest), the two fields of communication co-exist in a dynamic tension that may have ethical implications—and most certainly entails semantic nuances. Obviously, any informed discussion of the semantics and ethics of mass media in the post-9/11 world would do well to bear in mind that there is truthtelling and there is truthtelling, there is free flow of information and there is free flow of information, there are conflicts of interest and there are conflicts of interest.

What one doesn't read in the codes *per se* is the ethically significant difference between the journalist's professional mandate to gather and redistribute truthful information (*aka* power) to everyone and the persuader's professional mandate to use selective truthtelling to redistrubute information among paying clients and selected publics. Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying journalism is morally superior to public relations. That's a bandwagon I don't care to jump aboard. I'm merely saying that each discipline has its own professionally relevant roles and duties, all of which are legitimate in an open society.

Look briefly at what happens when we take a couple of the cases we dealt with in class

and process them with insights from moral philosophy and from their respective professional codes of ethics. For instance, Peter Arnett's and Geraldo Rivera's "bad career moves" can be seen as journalistic cases of having gone out on a limb when seeking to tell significant truths, while (apparently) failing to consider the potential for harm—in Arnett's case, harm to the fragile US mandate to wage war; in Rivera's case, harm to specific troops. At the same time, the two journalists' efforts to maintain their own independence came into conflict rather than compliance with the need for accountability—in Arnett's case, to his employers, in Rivera's case, to the military.

If we l ook at these as public relations cases, we have to focus on issues of credibility and information management. When viewed through the eyes of the two journalists' media management/employers, the behaviors were certainly problematic. And, when seen as public relations issues for the military coalition, the Pentagon, or Washington, D.C.'s fragile control over public opinion, the two cases become absolutely nightmarish. A conscientious governmental PR executive charged with establishing and maintaining positive public opinion would find the two journalists to be out of order and deserving of severe correcting. Not that Arnett and Rivera were expected to abide by the PRSA code of ethics, mind you; it's just that a PR person at the networks or government would be dismayed over the so-called "ethics" of the two journalists. As we said, there is truth, and then there is truth.

Taking the same cases thr ough any number of philosophic justification models would also be enlightening. For example, the popular "Potter Box," named after Harvard theologian Ralph Potter, asks us to fully define the moral dilemma, to examine the conflicting moral and non-moral values, to apply a legitimate moral principle, and to sort out our loyalties before making a decision. Such a decision-making process here would have to include the values of truth-telling, national security, and media competition; it could invoke deontological, consequentialistic, virtue, or other principles; it would sift through and prioritize loyalties to self, employers, sources, military, and the publics of—at the very least—America and Iraq. Good minds, rationally working through these problems, could very well disagree on the suggested solutions and pass legitimate judgment on the behaviors of Arnett, Rivera, the networks, and the US military, but at least they would have gotten to those solutions in an open and clear-headed fashion mandated by moral philosophy.

Similar decision-making processes can and should be used to resolve the other issues raised by my students. When framed as Aristotelian opposites, the issues were:
• news photography that either reflects a seemingly critical stance toward the war or is unabashedly pro-American and jingoistic, that either discloses or glosses over important—though unpopular—truths;
• "embedded journalism" that either offers uncensored views of the action or parrots the military value system;
• overly passive or overly aggressive reportage, each with "attitude";
• etc.

If the issues are more fully nuanced (which becomes possible when we force ourselves to withhold judgment temporarily) and the professional ethics more thoroughly culled, the discussions and conclusions inevitably move away from moralizing and toward moral philosophy. In the process the exercise ceases to be impassioned "street rhetoric" and becomes academically and professionally defensible, even pragmatic.

What we've just gone through is an exercise in ethical decision-making. As we do in most of our applied media ethics classes, we've taken some contentious issues and examined them systematically. We've noted that the codes of ethics for the media organizations—in this case SPJ and PRSA—are both advisory and educational. They ask us to do our own thinking

rather than imposing minimalistic standards upon us. This doesn't mean that those codes don't get trotted out in the heat of a controversy and invoked by some as Holy Grail. Neither does it imply that turning to the codes will te rminate unsophisticated moralizing. But our exercise here today does indicate that the challenge remains for media practitioners (and students and faculty) to do a better job of working through moral dilemmas, and certainly to do a better job of helping the public understand the struggles we go through to get it right.