
Gather a group of mass media ethics professors in a room, and you will probably get them to agree on the basic objective of their courses—prepare students to make ethical decisions in their mass media careers.

But try to get them on agree on the best methods? On one side of the room will be those advocating a strong theoretical foundation with a philosophical emphasis. On the other side will be those insisting on the pragmatic approach with case studies analyzing ethical dilemmas. Somewhere in the middle of the room will be a few who combine both approaches, yet cannot find that ideal “Golden Mean” between the theoretical and practical.

Claiming to have that “best way” to teach media ethics, another new textbook presents a commendable effort to combine the two approaches, although it leans noticeably on theory.

Doing Ethics in Media: Theories and Practical Applications by pioneering media ethicist Jay Black and emerging scholar Chris Roberts, both with professional and teaching backgrounds, present a workable six-question decision-making model woven through their exhaustive treatment of ethical theory.

As noted by one reviewer highlighted on the back cover, they have assembled what has been “scattered” among “the best” on the growing shelf of media ethics textbooks. While the 450-page text laudably attempts to equally combine theory and case studies, the two authors clearly sit on the philosophical side of the room.
The only obvious similarity with Black’s previous Doing Ethics in Journalism: A Handbook with Case Studies\textsuperscript{1} are the first two words of the title. The popular 1999 book used The Society of Professional Journalists code of ethics as its framework for commentary and analysis of fact-based cases and decision-aiding checklists. In the new work, the SPJ code is among several analyzed, while the cases are fictional, hypothetical scenarios in a land called “Freedonia.”

While the book’s six “5Ws and H” questions recall familiar ethical and moral reasoning models and theories for decision making (e.g. values, principles, duty, stakeholders), the phrasing and use of the questions as a lesson-based framework for thirteen chapters create an original student and professor-friendly approach and style. Each chapter begins with a boxed summary of the chapter’s objectives and ends with “chapter vocabulary” and “practical applications.” A companion website features definitions and other learning aids.

In a brief introduction, “Welcome to the Media Ethics Environment,” the authors state that their practical “Doing ethics in media” approach “should be based on moral philosophy and theory, not mere moralizing.”\textsuperscript{2} In other words, students and professors should focus on ethical theory—not common sense, logic or emotion—in making ethical decisions.

Consideration of the first question, “What is your problem?,” includes the book’s first chapter “Ethics and Moral Reasoning,” an introductory look at using ethical theories with case studies to define basic dilemmas, conflicting values and competing relationships.

The second question, “Why not follow the rules?,” is examined in the next two chapters. Chapter Three, “Codes of Ethics and Justification Models,” analyzes the “expectations” of codes from several professional media organizations and decision-making models, including the Potter Box. Chapter Four, “Media Traditions and the Paradox of Professional,” explores media history, press theory, and professionalism.

These professional ethics codes reappear elsewhere, along with codes from such diverse media companies and groups as Al Jazeera, bloggers, and the Free Speech Coalition, a trade association for the adult entertainment industry. The “Freedonia” case studies first appear in this section separated into professions of journalism, new media, public relations, advertising, and entertainment. Each case ends with comprehensive lists of analytical suggestions, “Questions” and “Thinking It Through.”
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The third question, “Who wins, who loses?,” is explored in Chapter Four, “Moral Development and the Expansion of Empathy” and Chapter Five, “Loyalty and Diversity.” Chapter Four features an exploration of moral development through the theories of five moral psychologists and four useful tables to diagram answers to the end-of-chapter questions. Chapter Five details concerns about loyalty and diversity using theory, ethical codes and a thoughtful essay on media diversity by Eric Deggans, TV/media critic for the *St. Petersburg Times*.

The fourth question, “What’s It Worth?,” focuses on the meaning and application of moral or non-moral values involved in mass media industries in four chapters: “Personal and Professional Values,” “Truth and Deception,” “Privacy and Public Life,” and “Persuasion and Propaganda.” This section illustrates the authors’ framework of addressing topics, then discussing their relevance to the major media professions. As opposed to media ethics textbooks organized by ethical issues distinctive of specific media professions, the *Doing Ethics* framework can give students a deeper appreciation of other concentrations than their own. For example, advertising and public relations majors can discover the use of persuasion and propaganda in news-gathering, reporting, and other editorial functions.

As the authors admit, most media ethics textbooks examine moral philosophy first. But *Doing Ethics* starts that treatment on page 305 with the fifth question, “Who’s whispering in your ear?” The authors divide “five general schools of thought” into three chapters: “Consequentialism and Utility,” “Deontology and Moral Rules,” and “Virtue, Justice, and Care.” Those ideas are then clustered under principles of ends, means, motivations, values and relationships.

In this comprehensive overview, the authors cite the better-known philosophers (Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, Aristotle, and John Rawls), and also include less familiar, but significant, thinkers (William Frankena, W. D. Ross, Bernard Gert, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Carol Gilligan). They also reference several media ethicists, including Cliff Christians, Louis Hodges, Edmund Lambeth, and John Merrill, along with sections on the major philosophers titled “If ________were sharing your office.”

The textbook concludes with the sixth question, “How’s your decision going to look?” examined in Chapter Thirteen, “Accountability, Transparency and Credibility,” which defines and applies those concepts, tools and systems for justifying ethical decisions to the public, media practitioners, and other stakeholders. *Doing Ethics*’
strong theoretical emphasis could be too challenging for students—and some professors—lacking a philosophical inclination or background. The textbook’s readable layout and authors’ practical approach, however, could help professors adapt the theoretical element to their students’ interests and needs.

The “Freedonia” case studies analyze key problems in the five major media professions of journalism, new media, public relations, advertising and entertainment. Some resemble real situations or familiar tales (e.g. Donny Jepp, Annifer Jeniston, or a college fraternity leaving a dead horse in the dean’s office from *Animal House*), giving students some valuable points of reference to their existing knowledge and experiences. More “key word” definitions could be included in the actual textbook rather than a supplementary website.

The comprehensive dissection of each case by lengthy lists of questions can help students become skilled ethical decision makers. But at what point do these “aids” become a deterrent to critical and independent thinking? For one case, the authors offer eighteen “potential lines of reasoning” for discussion. When do such questions start giving students the answers or encourage a predictable pattern of decision making?

Although the textbook might be too “deep” in theory for a combined media law and media ethics course or graduate-level professional programs, *Doing Ethics* offers the optimum philosophical treatment of media ethics with a realistic and pragmatic focus on decision making in critical mass media issues and dilemmas.

NOTES

3 Ibid., 305.