The work of journalists is a form of public discourse that when practiced well can foster meaningful debate, thoughtful reflection, and promote productive dialogue. This perspective is reflected in the *Principles of Journalism*, “Statement of Purpose,” developed by journalists and educators.

The central purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with accurate and reliable information they need to function in a free society. This encompasses myriad roles—helping define community, creating common language and common knowledge, identifying a community's goals, heroes and villains, and pushing people beyond complacency. This purpose also involves other requirements, such as being entertaining, serving as watchdog and offering voice to the voiceless. (Rosenstiel & Kovach, 1997, p. 1).

Although there are differences among various journalist practices, news reporting, investigative journalism, editorial writing and cartooning, and opinion or commentary journalism, all “journalists are inevitably engaged in a moral and ethical enterprise, whether they recognize it or not” (Callahan, 2003, p. 6). Opinion journalism as a genre of journalist practice seems particularly apposite to the roles established in the “Statement of Purpose.” Opinion journalists engage in creating and shaping the language, values, and “social truths” for national and local communities. In the area of media and journalism ethics relatively few studies have focused on the ethical dimension of the work of these journalists as a particular form of public discourse. In particular, there is a need to consider the way in which the work of opinion journalists embodies and develops a theoretical framework for moral decision-making while considering the practical implications of this framework.
In this paper we take the perspective that all journalists are engaged in moral work and opinion journalists are particularly important in developing public discourse. This view challenges a traditional value-free model of media and journalism ethics (Pech and Leibel, 2006). The search for alternative paradigms to the traditional value-free model of media and journalism ethics has led scholars from various disciplines to explore care ethics as a theoretical and practical alternative. Steiner and Okrusch (2006) review the critiques of care ethics and conclude that “caring must be specifically politicized to embrace strangers and communities of differential pull—in relationship not only to their known and ‘seen’ sources and subjects, but also their audiences, whom they do not know individually. It must address structural and institutional problems and abuses” (p. 108). They maintain that care ethics offers journalists an alternative framework for moral decision-making. “Applying a revitalized care ethics may save public journalism from some of its empirical, conceptual, and rhetorical weaknesses” (p. 117). Pech and Leibel (2006) find that care can be part of a journalist’s normative goals. Vanacker and Breslin (2006) apply care ethics to journalistic practice, positing “dialogue” as the most fundamental component.

This recent research which applies care ethics to the study and practice of media and journalism ethics has focused on “mainstream journalism” (Pech and Leibel, 2006) and therefore on news reporting (Steiner and Okrusch, 2006; Vanacker and Breslin, 2006). As in other approaches to media and journalism ethics, opinion journalism as a particular type of journalist work has tended to be neglected by those exploring an ethics of care approach.

This paper will explore the work of Ellen Goodman, a widely syndicated columnist whose columns regularly appear in over four hundred daily newspapers in the US and on multiple websites. Goodman’s longevity and exposure make her relatively unique among editorial columnists and exceptional among the few women who practice opinion journalism. We will argue that her work is also unique in that it embodies a care ethics and so demonstrates the possibilities inherent in this approach for journalists to nurture constructive public discourse. We begin with a discussion of the vulnerability of public discourse and an explanation of the conceptual framework of an ethics of care. These provide a context for our analysis of Goodman’s work.

Pedagogy also provides both context and purpose to this discussion. The opinion journalism of today was forged not only as a reflection of a changing media environment and the social and political controversies of
our times, but just as importantly, by the teaching, learning, and values explicit in the post-secondary curricula of journalism, communication, and media studies. It too has been instrumental in defining the role of media and its commentary in public discourse. Moreover, that role has become increasingly complex as traditional and emerging media create a seemingly ever-expanding venue for opinion and a diverse vox popular.

In hope of contributing constructively to the still evolving definition of ethics in public discourse, this analysis and discussion is presented as a case study for application in the classroom to further understanding of the moral and ethical dimensions of opinion journalism.

**The Vulnerability of Public Discourse**

Hannah Arendt (1972), in her analysis of the lying that took place surrounding the Pentagon Papers, notes the vulnerability of public discourse and the need for a careful tending of this discourse. She writes, “Facts need testimony to be remembered and trustworthy witnesses to be established in order to find a secure dwelling place in the domain of human affairs” (Arendt, 1972, p. 6). Journalists play a vital role in that they function as these trustworthy witnesses. The ethical principles, norms, and practices that have informed much contemporary journalism are based on a concept of justice. The work of the journalist is either objective and impartial work, providing information, or it is directed at arguing for the definitiveness of one position within a dispute. While the work of opinion journalists, when done well, provides arguments for a position, the adversarial stance of opinion journalists is quite limiting. In contemporary society, the nature of public discourse frequently relies on polarizing and adversarial language patterns that are often reinforced by opinion journalism. This practice limits the power of that discourse and prevents movement towards a more just society that promotes the flourishing of all members of the society. It makes public discourse more vulnerable rather than nurturing its growth.

Building on the research of Carol Gilligan (1982), Nel Noddings (1984) first proposed the concept of an ethics based on care. Over the last twenty years, a care ethics has begun to be articulated by a number of scholars (see especially, Benhabib, 1997; Card, 1991; Held, 1993; Kitty and Myers, 1987; Noddings, 2002b; Ruddick, 1989; Tronto, 1993; Walker, 1998). They have identified some of the limitations of a moral approach to political issues that focuses primarily on the concept of justice. For example, justice is not very powerful for addressing a wide range of social
and global inequalities. With respect to journalism ethics, Callahan (2003) argues for the need for a set of cross-cultural ethical principles to guide the practice of all types of journalism and recognizes the limitations of traditional ethical approaches.

Those scholars developing care ethics point out that approaches that are grounded in a concept of justice use a language that relies on a theory of individualism. Hamington and Miller’s (2006) volume identifies the limitations of a morality that “is staunchly grounded in individualistic constructs such as consequences, rights, and principles” (p. xv). Margaret Walker explains that much public discourse is characterized by a language that speaks of “unacceptable cost, economic realism, and individual responses to market forces as a solution” (Hamington & Miller, 2006, p. 145). Vanacker and Breslin note, the dominant ethical approaches rely on a “war model” of dialogue (p. 201) which requires individuals to advance adversarial positions rather than seek mutual understanding and compromise. A significant difference between an approach that emphasizes justice and one that emphasizes care is the logical structure of the discourse that is required for carrying out moral deliberation. From the perspective of justice, the person making the judgment must stand outside of the situation as objective. From the perspective of care, those making the moral decisions are positioned within the situation and cannot remove themselves from the situation. The activity of care and the principles that guide that activity cannot be separated, and indeed, should not be separated.

While some scholars have suggested that care ethics is limited to private and personal interactions, “other scholars firmly rejected traditional divisions between the personal and political, rejecting as well the thesis that justice is appropriate to the public or political sphere while care belongs to the domains of family and charitable organizations” (Steiner and Okrusch, p. 111). Ethics of care advocates have argued for the necessity of articulating care as a moral and political category in order to help address some of these limitations. Hamington and Miller’s (2006) volume provides examples of how care ethics can contribute to a public discourse that can better address many of our current social problems such as criminal rehabilitation, environmental concerns, the relationship of work and home, and the crisis of global hunger. Vanacker and Breslin’s (2006) study applies care ethics to journalism. Their study examines three specific contributions: research into global media ethics, critiques of established professional norms and practices, and development of guidelines for reporting on crime victims (pp. 204-205).
There is a need for journalistic work that recognizes the vulnerability of public discourse and that strives to develop theoretical moral understandings that support the nurturing of this discourse. An ethics of care provides a conceptual and practical framework.

**CARE ETHICS: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Our study of media ethics and analysis of opinion journalism requires that we first set out the general conception of care ethics with which we are working. Those scholars who have been articulating and developing this ethic do not agree on how to conceptualize care. These differences are, at least in part, based on the paradigms of caring with which they begin. Two of the most significant theorists, Nel Noddings and Joan Tronto, exemplify this difference. Noddings focuses on the caring relationship that takes place in raising children. Tronto’s focus is more often on the medical profession as a caring profession. The work of both of these theorists informs our conceptual understanding of care ethics.

In their article “Toward a Feminist Theory of Care,” Fisher and Tronto (1991) developed a definition of caring that Tronto has continued to use as the basis of her work. She quotes that definition in her work, *Moral Boundaries* (1993).

On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a *species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ’world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible.* That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (p. 103)

Based on this definition, Tronto conceptualizes care as an activity and a disposition. She suggests that a care ethics can help us better reflect on and develop our moral practice. The emphasis is on developing caring activities and dispositions. She identifies four elements that are part of this ethics: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. In order to care-about others, one must be able to suspend one’s own goals and concerns. This is not simply taking an objective position. It requires that one be open to others, recognizing that they matter and have needs. Attentiveness often allows one to see needs that are overlooked by the inattentive. Caring-about leads to the need to assess one’s responsibility. Responsibility is different from and more ambiguous than
obligation. It moves one to the work of caring-for the other. This work must be done properly, with competence. Within the context of professional ethics, this means that work must be done well and not simply within the measure of the law or some set of professional standards or principles. Finally, a care ethics recognizes that this work is always done in relationship to the one cared-for. The response of the other is part of the work of caring. Caring work recognizes vulnerability and inequalities, and needs the responsiveness of the other in order to assess the real needs and the appropriate care.

One limitation of Tronto’s conceptualization is that it seems to have no place for bringing newness into our world and so for carrying out the moral and political transformations that she clearly desires. She emphasizes maintaining, continuing, and repairing the world. Noddings’ approach, in *Educating Moral People*, is helpful here. She emphasizes the importance of starting with “the caring relation as a basic good” (2002a, p. 87). It is not so much the activity or the disposition that has moral worth as it is the caring relationship. Noddings states that care ethics “recognizes moral interdependence” (p. 88). She emphasizes recognition of the everyday and of joy. According to Noddings, this emphasis on the everyday enhances human receptivity. As individuals we appreciate the other in the caring relationship as the source of our own ethicality. Arendt (1972) recognized this in her concept of natality. We wonder at the newness that comes upon us. Noddings suggests that the experience of joy is an affect of our recognition of our relatedness.

Our conceptualization of care begins with Noddings’ recognition that the caring relationship is the basic good. This establishes relationships, rather than individuals, as the primary unit of ethical consideration. The goal of care ethics is the development of human community. Because of this focus, care ethics can function in the public and political sphere and foster creativeness in public discourse. Our conceptualization addresses the primary limitation in Tronto’s definition while recognizing the usefulness of her analysis of attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness.

**ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK**

In developing this study, we were interested in finding an instantiation in contemporary journalism of care ethics. We wanted to understand how an ethics of care approach might be enacted in opinion journalism. However, we also suspected that recurring examples of the approach
would not be found with any frequency. In order to identify a particular opinion journalist, we developed a set of criteria. We began with editorial columnists whose function is to shape, critique, and advance public discourse in the United States. We then identified those whose work spans multiple years and has received significant professional recognition. We limited our search to those whose columns appear with regular frequency in print and on-line. Finally, we attempted to identify a columnist whose work spanned a wide range of topics. After applying these criteria, we selected a columnist, Ellen Goodman, who work seemed, upon initial consideration, to have potential for demonstrating care ethics.

Goodman's columns first appeared on the Boston Globe's opinion-editorial pages in 1970 and since 1976 her columns have been nationally syndicated by the Washington Post Writers Group. Goodman's columns cover a wide range of topics from medical ethics to politics and civil liberties to gender issues. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Commentary (1980) among other professional recognitions. Six collections of her columns have been published, the most recent Paper Trial: Common Sense in Uncommon Times, in 2004. Finally, in reviewing possible columnists we found Goodman's work distinctive in its structure and substance and concluded that a sample of her columns would provide a body of work which might exemplify a care ethics framework for public discourse.

Given the volume of Goodman's work, we relied on two collections of her columns Paper Trail: Common Sense in Uncommon Times and Value Judgments to base our sample. Using these two collections as starting points we selected categories of columns appearing in both books. Goodman grouped her collections around specific categories, such as “American Scene,” “Living and Dying in the High-Tech Age,” “Politics,” and “Bio and other Ethics.” Examining the topics of columns represented under each category enabled us to identify major themes across the two collections—technology, gender, and politics. We reviewed a total of three hundred columns, spanning the years 1989-2003, and selected those that clearly corresponded to one of the three themes.

Examination of the columns was grounded in discourse analysis and guided by standard qualitative inquiry (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Patton, 1990). Fundamentally, discourse analysis considers the relationship between the text and the larger social or cultural context in which they appear such that the interaction constructs a social reality (Mill, 1997; van Dijk, 1997). This perspective is particularly appropriate to our application of care ethics. The influence and importance of a care ethics arises from
its potential to construct realities of “moral interdependence” as a counterpoint to the dominant adversarial discourses.

We independently analyzed the columns within each of the three major themes: technology, gender, and politics. The analytic process involved three steps. First, examination of how the major themes were contextualized in the everyday. Second, identification of the relational terms used to frame the issues, events, or policies. Third, analysis of the four elements of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. Attentiveness is characterized by an attention to others that recognizes needs that are often overlooked or ignored in the public discourse about an issue or policy. Responsibility is evidenced by a shared relational responsibility for addressing the unrecognized needs. An individual obligation to follow rules or law is not a sufficient indicator of responsibility. Competence requires discourse and discussion about what constitutes the basic good and furthers human community. Factual knowledge or data is not a sufficient indicator of competence. Responsiveness is marked by attention to vulnerabilities and inequalities and the importance of relationships in determining the needs of the one cared for. We looked for indication that the responsiveness of the other is central.

DEScriptive Analysis

The following discussion presents a summary of our analysis of columns organized around the three themes.

Technology

Under the theme of technology we looked at columns published between 1991 and 2003. We found a variety of topics associated with technology, for example, the internet, new media, surveillance cameras, and medical technologies that affect the beginnings and endings of lives. In all of these, the particular issues are situated in an everyday experience or narrative. For example, when addressing the topic of “Internet Intimacy” Goodman begins with her own experience of being caught in online traffic, trying to be admitted to the birthing room of baby Sean, the first child born online. Many of the columns begin with her apparently mundane interactions with family, friends, and the tools of everyday life. She situates technology in the realm of the interpersonal. This is neither purely private nor public. Rather, it is a relational realm of moral interdependence.
In the range of columns dealing with technology she draws attention to how technology impacts us as we interact with others and our world. While the promise of technology is to create a more connected, efficient, and open world, she stresses the interpersonal. Technology often leads to less human interaction. It leads us to become observers of the lives of others and so avoid acknowledgement of our interdependence. Technology can also obscure responsibility. For example, in a column on conception technology where the responsible physician uses his own sperm as the bank’s primary donor, she leads us back to the recognition that responsibility involves caring-for, “fatherhood is something you do, not something you donate” (Goodman, 1993, p. 311).

Her columns on technology also recognize the moral nature of competent decision-making. For example, in writing about the Nancy Cruzan case, she makes the distinction between the “everyday language of Americans talking to each other” (p. 320) and the legal language of the Supreme Court arguments about family rights versus the rights of the state. A competent decision requires that we have interpersonal discussions about “the quality of life and the quality of mercy.” While the columns on technology do not fully develop the characteristic of responsiveness as set out in a care ethics, Goodman stresses the vulnerability and inequality that is often present in birth and death.

Gender

Within the gender theme we placed topics such as education, marriage, family, and workplace. Again, we found that Goodman situates these topics in the everyday context, emphasizing the relational realm of moral interdependence. For example, she introduces “The Guilt Gap” which is a consideration of shared parenting, with a discussion about what her seat companion on a flight would like for Mother’s Day (p. 127). In this category we find a more completely developed understanding of the characteristic of responsiveness, of the need for interaction between the caring person and those cared for. What this woman desires, and what Goodman draws our attention to, is the distinction between caring for things and caring for people. Things can be attended to and left alone. People place demands. This is particularly true of children. The woman in the scenario laments the gap between tasks and feelings, such as anxiety and guilt. What she is recognizing is that moral response requires feelings that acknowledge the needs and vulnerability of others.

Columns in this category emphasize the importance of placing responsibility where action can be carried out in a competent manner.
This is most often not the level of Congress or state administrations. A column on welfare reform, “The End of Motherhood as We Knew It,” exemplifies this. She notes Republicans and Democrats both argue that requiring someone to work, including poor women, is the equivalent of responsibility. Children acknowledge this with “a proud look when his mother goes off to a first job” (Goodman, 2004, p. 208). Goodman draws our attention to the inequality and vulnerability inherent in this approach. Middle class women are praised for leaving the workforce to care for children. Poor women are considered irresponsible if they do not work. Goodman offers no solution to welfare reform, but emphasizes that whatever policy is implemented, it needs to confront the false dichotomy that has been drawn in order to allow for competent and responsible childrearing. In another column she emphasizes that responsible motherhood pushes women back into the world. Issues of schools, racism, and war must not be ignored. She recognizes that responsibility for those cared for pushes us into responsibility in the wider human arena.

**Politics**

Within the politics theme, we placed topics that are part of this wider human arena. A criticism can be raised of Goodman that she is insular. She does not extend far enough into this political arena, including international affairs. But after September 11, 2001, she is pushed more fully into that arena. She writes on the aftermath of September 11 and the Iraq war. Even on these topics, she continues to situate the issue in the interpersonal realm. She begins with iconic images such as American flags draped from windows and porches, individual soldiers (Jessica Lynch), President Bush in a flight suit (“Mission Accomplished”), and other collective images featured in print and broadcast news accounts. She writes

I know that it’s impossible—and unbearable—to retain the first shock of any disaster. But when “healing” and “closure” are marketed, when anger and sadness are produced, I cannot be the only one who rejects the packaging of my own experience. I cannot be the only one who feels manipulated into caring…about what I truly care about. (Goodman, 2004, p. 184)

She seems to suggest that by keeping these events in the context of the interpersonal where we emphasize moral relationships, we may be able to find new directions and ways of coping with and overcoming the horrors
of political life. At the very least, we may be able to recognize what is needed to support a humane world.

In a 2002 column, “When Suicide Becomes a Weapon,” she takes a firm stand. She writes, “any culture that takes pride in having the next generation as a ready supply of cheap weapons has already lost its future” (2004, p. 182). In 2003 in “Iraq: How did We Get Here?” she reminds us that “Preventive war, said Bismarck, is like committing suicide out of the fear of death” (p. 186).

In reflecting on the media spin related to Jessica Lynch, Goodman emphasizes the importance of not making her a symbol, but of focusing on her real humanity and so her real bravery. Her political columns draw attention to the importance of carrying out our political reflections in the context of the interpersonal. When we lose sight of the humanity of others, we also forget that human caring relationships are the fundamental good that must be nurtured.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, we found that Goodman situated the wide range of topics in an everyday and relational context. This positioning differs from the stance of the typical opinion journalist who largely frames policies and issues in an adversarial context. In addition, her approach focuses on the lived nature of decisions rather than on legal and philosophical debates. Because of this perspective, Goodman’s writing illustrates the attributes of a care ethics. Goodman herself acknowledges that “I deliberately set out to write about the world as we experience it” (1993, p. 3).

Attentiveness is demonstrated in her revelation of unrecognized consequences that may emerge from everyday decisions. Responsibility is placed as close to the decision-makers as possible. Those who are caring for others are recognized as being in the best position to make important life decisions. Goodman emphasizes the limitations, misuse, and often folly, of using legislation and regulation as the basis for these decisions. She does not dismiss the importance of competence, but rather understands competence as including moral dimensions that enable people to make judgments about a good human life. Her work also demonstrates the characteristic of responsiveness. She asks her readers to recognize human vulnerability and inequality across a range of issues and experiences. In doing this she focuses on identifying and assessing real human needs. Moreover, her work develops a theory that places the caring relationship in the position of the basic good. The body of her work exam-
ined here suggests that by situating topics in the everyday, in relational narratives, and in interpersonal observations, Goodman is able to structure her discourse around mutual interdependence and caring relationships. While she does not intentionally apply a formal care ethics, because she contextualizes the issues in this manner, she creates a perspective conducive to such an ethics.

Our conceptualization of care ethics as applied to Goodman’s work illustrates how a care ethics can function in the public domain to nurture vulnerable public discourse. Our paper is a case study of a recognized opinion journalist. It shows the contributions of journalist work that departs from the dominant model of adversarial discourse. Our study can be used in a classroom setting to demonstrate the role of ethics in opinion journalism. Having students appreciate the claim with which we began that all journalists “are inevitably engaged in a moral and ethical enterprise, whether they recognize it or not” (Callahan, 2003, p. 6) is often a challenge that goes unaddressed.

While there are multiple perspectives on how to analyze and present the work of specific journalists, publications, electronic media sources, and social commentators, the public, prodigious, and acclaimed body of commentary by Ellen Goodman can provide a unique learning opportunity for students because of her clear and reoccurring ethical commitments which are fundamental to the value and meaning of truly deliberative public discourse.

NOTE

1 The Project for Excellence in Journalism has for the last several years issued a report that examines the state of the news media and that explores the purpose of journalism, the principles that guide journalism, and the responsibilities of journalists (http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.com/2008).

REFERENCES


