

In the middle of the 15th Century, Johannes Gutenberg changed the course of human history. His innovations in the printing process and, more importantly, the invention of metal movable type rank up there with harnessing fire and the use of the wheel as the most influential discoveries of all time. In that instant, the transmission of information and ideas leapt from the Stone Age into the Modern World. And for the next four and a half centuries journalists relied on the printed word as their method of dissemination. The printing press gave birth to broadsheets and pamphlets that, in turn, evolved into the familiar newspapers we still have today.

In the early 1900's two new inventions, Radio in 1901 and Television 25 years later, would begin to redefine what a journalist is. Gutenberg "shrank the world" by granting access of *literate* people who could afford it to vast stores of knowledge and commentary. Radio and TV not only broadened the area over which the news could spread, but they also made the information available to everyone, not just the wealthy or educated.

In our lifetimes, most of us will celebrate the Sixcentennial, or 600 Year Anniversary of the printed word. Technology over that span expanded the audience to a global scale. But all that pales in comparison when we consider the past 25 years. The World Wide Web emerged in the late 1980's or early '90's. By 1994 Internet radio broadcasting began. Ten years after that Facebook launched with YouTube (2005) and Twitter (2006) nipping at its heels. Virtually overnight, journalism morphed from an age-old respected institution of responsible and balanced critical thought practiced by trained professionals into the cacophonous miasma that is today's blogosphere.

The Society of Professional Journalists

It is getting more difficult every day for the general consumer of information to distinguish actual journalism from the onslaught of half-truths and opinions promulgated by some self-proclaimed expert with a connected device. That is why "Media Literacy" amongst the audience, and, "Media Ethics" practiced by the creators of journalism are more vital today than ever. While journalists have very little control over the former, they must demand application of the latter to ensure the "free press".

It is important to remember that the First Amendment differentiates between Free Speech and a Free Press. An individual has the right to express any opinion, offensive or not. That is free speech. The Constitutional "Press"; however, was intended to act as a "watchdog" over public and governmental corruption free from the threat of retaliation. Thus, it is the responsibility of journalists to always report ethically.

About the same time breakthroughs in the electronic transmission of media were occurring, a group of aspiring journalists at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana formed Sigma Delta Chi. Since 1909, ΣΔΧ (later changed to the Society of Professional Journalists or SPJ) has held to the mission of protecting First Amendment rights and encouraging ethical practices and diversity in journalism. SPJ's "Code of Ethics" is considered by most in the field as the benchmark for any journalist to which to adhere. Regardless of the final medium of publication, if young correspondents follow these four simple tenets they can count themselves members of the Free Press.

The Code

The SPJ "Code of Ethics" is not some dusty 1,000-page tome quibbling over the minutiae of morality or some nuanced, philosophical arguments over what it **is** to be Journalist. No. It's a [single page](#). Four simple questions.

1. Is it true?
2. Is it balanced?

3. Is it unbiased?

4. Do you stand by it?

Hand it out to your aspiring journalists. Laminate it and hang it on your classroom wall. And, most importantly, use it in the evaluative process when critiquing a student's work. In the end this is how the public can weigh the competency and reliability of the sources of their news.

SEEK TRUTH AND REPORT IT

Journalism first and foremost is the reporting of facts. Accuracy, Fairness, Courage, and Honesty distinguish responsible journalism from opinion and commentary. There are neither excuses nor room for inaccurate coverage of a topic. If mistakes are discovered acknowledge them and rectify them immediately. And, always identify sources.

Seek out a variety of points of view to ensure "the whole" story. And, always give those accused of something the opportunity to defend themselves of the allegations.

As mentioned earlier, the press was established to monitor and report on public affairs and the government. Have the courage to hold those agencies and entities that do harm to the public good accountable.

And, finally, insist on honesty from your reporters. Never distort facts or engage in stereotyping of individuals or groups. Always identify opinion, advocacy, or commentary as what it is. And never, ever abide plagiarism.

MINIMIZE HARM

When reporting, the journalist should weigh the importance of the story against the potential harm it could cause. It is a lesson often lost on Social Media yet so simple to solve. Everyone involved in a news story—the subject, your sources, even your audience—are all human beings and deserve to be treated with respect. That is not to say all sides must have an equal voice. After all, "Ethics" on the grand stage involves identifying moral rights and wrongs and, so, it falls upon the journalist to explain the situation for the consumers to draw their own opinions.

ACT INDEPENDENTLY

A journalist should see as their first and only obligation the public to whom they serve. Every so often I click on a "news story" only to find it is a cleverly disguised sales pitch for this product or that service. It seems especially rampant among the medical field. And, while advertising copy and marketing materials are valid forms of communication, they have no place camouflaged as actual news. Conflicts of interest should be avoided in reporting.

BE ACCOUNTABLE AND TRANSPARENT

If the journalists have done their duties, standing by their work is not a problem. Reporters must take responsibility for the words and pictures they choose and be ready to defend those choices when asked. In this vein, journalists should lead the discussion when it comes to increasing the public's Media Literacy. And, finally, expose all unethical conduct in the field of journalism any time it is discovered.

Finally,

In 1450 Johannes Gutenberg revolutionized communication. Imagine the painstaking work of setting and inking as many as 2600 individual, lead *sorts* in heavy wooden frames, carrying that frame that could weigh up to 50 pounds each, sliding said frame into a *screw press*, and cranking the large screw to compress inked frame, paper, and platen. And repeat. And repeat. And repeat.

Thankfully, today an iPhone and skilled thumbs replace that cumbersome task, but it does not resolve today's journalists from the "heavy lifting". It is more incumbent today than ever for a responsible Free Press to define truth in the media in the face of the ctrl-V generation who swallows whole the trending meme-of-the-day without considering the source. As professional journalists, we **MUST** be that source of record.

Useful Links

SPJ's Code of Ethics: <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

NPR Ethics Handbook: <http://ethics.npr.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/NPR-Ethics-Handbook-5.2.2012-Final-Edition.pdf>

New York Times Handbook: http://www.nytc.com/wp-content/uploads/NYT_Ethical_Journalism_0904-1.pdf

University of Wisconsin Center for Journalism Ethics: <https://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu>

Ethical Journalism Network (EJN): <http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/en>

NewseumED (not Safari friendly): <https://newseumed.org/>

Collection of Lesson Plans: <http://www.schooljournalism.org/ethics-lesson-plans/>

PBS Student Reporting Labs Lesson: <http://www.studentreportinglabs.com/resource/lesson-13-who-makes-news>

Lessons from PBS: <http://www.studentreportinglabs.com/lesson-plans>

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