

July 2006

'Shift' Happens: What our PR students are willing to do when no one is watching

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Recommended Citation

Mathew A. Cabot. "Shift' Happens: What our PR students are willing to do when no one is watching"
Media Ethics Division Newsletter (2006).

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Ethical News

The newsletter of the AEJMC
Media Ethics Division

Summer 2006
Vol. 9, No. 4

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'Shift' Happens

Mathew Cabot
PF&R chair

Is it wrong to participate in a chatroom discussion about your product or company and not identify your association? Would you do it, though, if you were sure you wouldn't get caught?

Last spring, I asked these questions and others to 130 public relations students from three California universities. My goal was to test two important components of moral functioning: *moral sensitivity* and *moral character*.

The *moral sensitivity* portion of the questionnaire listed seven public relations industry-specific

behaviors and asked students whether those behaviors were wrong. All seven behaviors were taken directly from PRSA's code of ethics, which uses them as examples of code violations. Respondents were given the option of choosing "Yes," "No," or "It depends."

To measure *moral character*, I listed the same seven behaviors again and this time asked: "Would you do the following if you were sure you would not get caught?" This section was designed to detect a shift in attitudes when presented with the guarantee of anonymity.

Thomas Likona followed a similar methodology in his 1991 study on academic cheating. He found that the percentages between those

What our PR students are willing to do when no one is watching

who thought cheating was wrong and those who would do it anyway shifted – "sometimes dramatically." That led Likona to conclude: "While nearly all students judged the various forms of cheating to be wrong, significantly fewer were sufficiently committed to the value of academic honesty to refrain from cheating when they could get away with it."

In my study, I developed a "shift score" to measure the number of times a respondent changed his or her response in the second section based on the guarantee of anonymity. For example, if respondents agreed that a particular behavior was wrong in the first section but

See 'SHIFT HAPPENS,' Page 2

Some parting thoughts

Erik Ugland
division head

In the fall edition of *Ethical News*, I suggested that we were in the midst of a Renaissance period for media ethics and that public, professional and academic interest in these issues had never been so high. I still believe that, and I suspect most of you do as well.

What is less clear is how we, as both scholars and division members, can best seize the opportunities that this moment presents, both for our own purposes and for the benefit of the field.

Our division members, and many who are not yet members, have certainly done their part to advance the Media Ethics Division over the past year. MED membership has increased, our panel lineup for San Francisco is outstanding and our paper submissions increased by more than 40 percent!

But we should now start looking beyond MED and AEJMC for other ways to capitalize on this surging interest. Here are just a few:

Research

Begin discussions with book publishers about expanding their support for media ethics scholarship. Although there is considerable interest among publishers in media ethics textbooks, there is substantially less support for

See 'PARTING THOUGHTS,' Page 6

First tough call teaches student about teaching

Sean McDonald
journalism major
Univ. of Colorado at Boulder

Three days after 14-year-old Betsy Santon was killed in a tragic car accident in June, I found myself at an unavoidable crossroad most aspiring journalists dread.

As a full-time intern at the *Daily Camera* in Boulder this summer, I'm treated not like a student learning the ropes, but as a reporter relied on to carry equal weight.

And like any reporter working a "night cops" shift after someone dies, it was my job to bring Betsy

Santon to life again in 15 inches or less. It's a story most print writers have done, right?

Except, this being my first reporting job, I had never made those calls, never talked to heart-broken friends and family. I had never been forced to ask the questions that my teachers had spent so many hours trying to explain to frightened students.

But now it was my turn, and the story wasn't going anywhere.

I blankly stared at my office phone just three feet away, head pounding, sweat accumulating, feeling like the walls were falling in on me. So I tried to slowly talk my way through it.

All right, Sean – just dial, push

the buttons, make the calls and ask the questions. We've talked about this in class.

I dial Nikki Lindow, a best friend of Betsy's.

Be calm but sympathetic. Ask questions, but let them talk. Don't be pushy, but don't give up too easily.

Ring, Ring.
Don't panic. Stay focused. Keep things simple.

Ring, Ring.
"Hello, this is Nikki."
Oh no. It's all gone now. I'm done. Finished. I am blank.

"Hi, my name is Sean McDonald; I'm a reporter with the *Daily Camera* in Boulder."

See 'TEACHING,' Page 2

Many PR students' morals 'shift' in anonymous venues

'SHIFT HAPPENS,' from Page 1

indicated in the second section they would perform that behavior, they each received a "point." Likewise, if they marked "It depends" in the first section, but then said they would perform that behavior if they would not get caught, they received a point. The points were then totaled to produce a "shift score." The "shift score" is based on the presumption that the stronger one's moral character the more likely he or she would make the right (i.e., moral) choice regardless of whether someone was watching.

The results of the study were interesting – and disturbing – both in terms of moral sensitivity and moral character.

In the first section, many of the students did not correctly identify certain behaviors as wrong, even though all of them are clear violations of PRSA's code of ethics. While it may be argued that identifying those behaviors as wrong

requires specialized knowledge, at least a few of these behaviors seem to be intuitively wrong.

The opening question is a good example. Nearly 70 percent of the students thought it was OK to participate in a chatroom discussion about your product or company and not identify your association. In fact, in a follow-up interview, one student said she had been instructed during her internship to do just that on behalf of a client.

Is that an example of a lack of sensitivity to industry-specific code violations, or an underdeveloped moral conscience that doesn't recognize the behavior as being wrong?

This assumes, of course, that the student believes deception is inherently wrong.

The response to another behavior listed on the questionnaire may indicate that's not the case.

When asked whether

"spinning a situation to make it look better than it is" is wrong, only a third of the respondents said "yes."

That means the other two-thirds said it was either not wrong or it depended on the situation.

When I shared these results in my media ethics course – with a mix of journalism and PR students – there was general dismay. "Isn't that what PR people do?" asked one student, "to make things appear better than they are?"

As for the moral character portion of the questionnaire, there were about 100 instances in which respondents changed their minds about a particular behavior when they were guaranteed they could do it with impunity. Seventy percent of the students at two universities, and about half at the third, registered at least one shift.

One possible interpretation of these "character shifts" is that the majority of these students are motivated by the external threat of punishment, rather than the internal reward of virtue.

As Likona says, individuals need "to be able to judge what is right, care deeply about what is right, and then do what they believe to be right." What is particularly disturbing about these "shift scores" is that most of the students said they would perform or consider performing a behavior they knew was wrong – simply based on the idea they would not get caught.

If they are not committed to even the idea of doing the right thing and living a virtuous life, how could they possibly be expected to actually do the right thing in the face of real-world temptations and pressures?

One possible interpretation of these 'character shifts' is that the majority of these students are motivated by the external threat of punishment, rather than the internal reward of virtue.

First tough call to a grieving friend teaches student about teaching

'TEACHING,' from Page 1

And then, despite the anxiety, the nerves and a telephone that wouldn't stop vibrating in my chattering hand, it all just ... flowed.

I made many more phone calls to friends, coaches and family and wrote the story a few hours later. My state of mind had completely reversed, and, honestly, I felt like I had done a great job.

So was I prepared as well as I could have been? Were my teachers to thank, or was I just the recipient of divine intervention from the journalism gods?

The answer brought me back to a conversation I had with a classmate last semester.

Walking home after an afternoon reporting class, conversation found its way to the quality of journalism classes at CU. My classmate, who is very intelligent, and at the time was much more experienced than me, immediately offered up a strong stance.

"They aren't telling us how to do anything," she said. "I feel unprepared, like I'm supposed to do things I don't know how to do."

Without too much real-world experience at the time, I very passively bounced some short words back but settled the conversation into the back of my mind.

But after making the hard phone calls, doing the things all young journalist dread to do, and then reading the story in the paper the next morning, I now have input.

My classmate had been hoping to receive an education that is simply impossible.

There is no such thing as a fool-proof, awe-inspiring formula guaranteed to produce great journalism. A teacher can give his or her best effort (and I've seen some try) at standing in front of a class and feeding students some sort of step-by-step method, but more often than not it's just a waste of time.

The stories that make you put the paper down and think, "Wow, that was damn good," are

almost always the ones that are of a style all their own.

Sure, we need to be taught the "lede," the "nut graf" and that thing called the "inverted pyramid." But those are only the tools needed to create a style that makes a story interesting, not the other way around.

The carefully chosen adjectives of a good story, or how to ask the right questions of sobbing friends, can't come from a book or a teacher. Becoming a good journalist is about finding those things out for yourself, and good teaching is all about showing students the ways to find them.

And I think that is what I have been taught in my two years of journalism classes at CU, and why I think I've already had some success.

The point is, when I called Nikki Lindow, I had no idea what to do. But, as strange and as contradictory as it sounds, I knew exactly how to do it.

That's good teaching.