

Yael Warshel
Assistant Professor of Telecommunications and Journalism, College of Communications
Co-Funded Faculty, Rock Ethics Institute
The Pennsylvania State University
ywarshel@gmail.com

Responding to a Diverse and Global World: Ethics of International Reporting

Abstract

The assignment attempts to “de-Westernize” a course in “News Media Ethics” by broadening students’ ethical range to consider how American journalists cover cultures outside the United States. It begins with an exercise aimed at making students aware of the fact that American news media practitioners do not necessarily adhere to even their own ethical standards, rooted in the SPJ Code of Ethics. The code implores journalists to cover other cultures with context and without stereotypes, and by giving voice to a breadth of perspectives. When it comes to international coverage, however, these goals are not readily met. To achieve its outcome goals the assignment, therefore, draws on carefully selected materials that demonstrate the absence of equitable coverage internationally. Among those materials are newspaper articles, one of which students are required to re-write to gain practice in how to best operationalize the code, and more broadly, reflect on the notion that its ethics are relative, and that the practices of American journalists are culturally specific, namely to the American media system.

Description, Including Learning Objectives

The assignment attempts to internationalize, including “de-Westernize” a course in “News Media Ethics” It aims to do so by broadening students’ ethical range to consider how American journalists cover other cultures, especially cultures outside of the United States. The course targets students who plan to become American journalists and/or who simply consume American news. From the outset, when discussing news media ethics as a concept, students tend neither to be aware of nor self-reflexive about the concept that the “what” and “how” of journalism differs as based on the media system within which journalists works. When coupled with the course’s focus on the codification of ethics, as stated specifically in the Code of Ethics of the US Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), likewise, students tend to neither be aware of nor self-reflexive about the concept that contrary to their “universal” presumed nature, the ethics enshrined in this code are relative. They are derived from one localized historical milieu, European Enlightenment based notions of ethics, and moreover, are, like media systems, therefore, also culturally specific. These relative Eighteenth Century European ethics have been appropriated in the SPJ Code, specifically by and for American media practitioners. Their values are not necessarily shared worldwide by media practitioners, let alone, their subjects or audiences. Moreover, even if these two points are overlooked, it is unclear whether, as a practice, American journalists covering cultures other than their own, especially those outside the American media system, apply the code universally.

As perspective journalists working within a Liberal media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2010), or specifically, the American media system, students in the course read a chapter in their textbook about, “Covering a Diverse, Multicultural Society” (Foreman, 2015). The assignment, seeking to teach them how to better respond to a diverse and global world by instilling in them ethical standards for international reporting, supplements that required chapter with four news articles

and two music videos in order to achieve its learning outcomes (see Appendix A for tools required by instructor to perform assignment). The latter include a *Washington Post* article about Indian national customs (concerning the sanctity of cows), a *Los Angeles Times* article about Burkinabe political affairs (concerning the presidential transition of power) and the Band Aid 1984 African famine relief fundraising music video, “Do They Know its Christmas?”. These three are respectively paired for comparison with two spoof news articles, and a second music video. The former include two *Slate* articles selected from the series, “If it Happened Here.” One describes American national customs (concerning Thanksgiving) and the second, American political affairs (concerning the transition of power in the senate). The spoof video is the 2012 Radi-Aid Norwegian winter weather relief fundraising music video, “Africa for Norway” (see Appendix D for copies of these supplementary news articles).

To perform the exercise and corresponding assignment, students are asked to consider key context-based questions concerning the coverage by the two sample American news media pieces. After reviewing the spoof articles and music video, in conjunction with background detail I provide them about Indian history and culture, and Burkinabe history and politics, the students reflect on and come to revise their original opinions about the pieces. They comment on how the articles are de-contextualized and stereotype otherwise diverse cultures reported on in either article.

The exercise concludes with the requirement that students revise one of the two articles in order to more equitably operationalize the ethical goals proscribed by the SPJ. As journalists working in the United States, or correspondingly, as American news media consumers, I explain to them, they should expect to produce or consume news coverage that, at the very least, strives to meet SPJ standards. Moreover, they should reflect if they can go above and beyond these standards by considering multiple ethical perspectives, given the global world within which we live and within which coverage transpires (see Appendix B for time required and step-by-step guide for running the exercise and corresponding assignment).

Rationale

The exercise is meant to encourage students to move beyond shallow reporting about a single event and consider the importance of placing events in context in order that they practice producing cogent examples of ethical international coverage. When trying to meet such a goal students experience the dilemma of trying to tell stories about these events from the perspective of the culture/s they are covering (who hold ethics different from their own, inhabit a different media system, and may additionally even consume their coverage), on the one hand, while simultaneously trying to translate their reports into “their” (American) culture, for whose readers they are targeting, on the other hand.

Learning Outcomes

During the course of discussion students make comments about the lack of context provided in the American news media articles. The article entitled, “Hindu ‘cattle patrols’ in India seek to protect cows from beef eaters”, explains that Hindus revere cows as sacred and, therefore, do not consume them. However, it does not readily delve into discussions about the nationalization of those customs, nor gives mention, correspondingly, to Muslim cultural customs surrounding pigs, regarded as dirty, and thus, albeit for opposite reasons, neither something traditionally consumed. To that end, the article reads as though Hindus are murdering Muslims because they chose to eat beef at McDonalds rather than pig at Chipotle. As the students explain, had the article provided more contextual details, per the SPJ Code, they would have understood that what is at issue is not food. Rather, what is at stake are cultural customs and broader power relations between majority Hindus and minority Muslims in India. Apart from introducing further context, students have

suggested changing the title of the article to something like, “Hindus and Muslims clash over Hindu practices enshrined in Indian constitution requiring Muslims not eat beef”.

Similarly, the discussion about the second article entitled, “Burkina Faso Coup Leader Faces Military Pressure to Step Down”, ends with the students arguing that greater context for discussing the coup should have been provided, not only with regards to ongoing popular reform movements, but even about the country itself. The students readily explain that as American news consumers they know nothing about Burkina Faso, and that the article would be more ethically sound had it included more than just the passage that Burkina Faso is an, “impoverished landlocked West African nation”. By way of analogy, they explain a description of the US, as a “wealthy port-equipped North American nation” would neither be ethically sufficient.

At the same time, and insightfully, students note a Catch-22 dilemma when, on the one hand, reporting from within a Liberal media model for American news sources, but on the other, reporting about international affairs. On the one hand, per the SPJ Code, they should strive to provide context, avoid stereotypes, and seek out diverse voices, as the code stipulates. On the other hand, they point out, they need to use terms and concepts with which American readers are familiar—that is their primary audience. The two goals however, are in tension. Trying to simultaneously achieve these two goals is further complicated by the fact that their reporting may be consumed by audiences outside of the American media system. While the students are not able to suggest a solution to resolve these tensions, this exercise plants a seed in their ethical engagement with international communication and journalism. They realize that trying to adhere to a code of ethics that is born out of one media model, in what is otherwise a global world, poses an ethical dilemma. As either American journalists and/or American news consumers, they must grapple with this dilemma.

Appendix A: Tools Required by Instructor to Perform *Ethics of International Reporting* Assignment

A. Required Readings*:

(1) Base American reporting textbook chapter: Gene Foreman (2015). *The Ethical Journalist*, 2nd edition, Wiley-Blackwell, Chapter 17: Covering a Diverse, Multicultural Society.

B. Four Supplementary News Articles, per the below list**:

Coverage of National Customs

(1) Lakshmi, R. "Hindu 'cattle patrols' in India seek to protect cows from beef eaters. *The Washington Post*, Oct. 28 2015. www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/hindu-cattle-patrols-in-india-seek-to-protect-cows-from-beef-eaters/2015/10/28/89da1cc8-7c08-11e5-bfb6-65300a5ff562_story.html);

(2) Keating, J. "If It Happened There... American's Annual Festival Pilgrimage Begins." *Slate*. Nov 27, 2014. www.slate.com/blogs/the_world_/2013/11/27/if_it_happened_there_how_the_u_s_media_would_cover_thanksgiving_if_it_was.html

Coverage of Political Affairs

(3) Dixon, R. "Burkina Faso Coup Leader Faces Military Pressure to Step Down." *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 21, 2015. <http://touch.latimes.com/#section/-1/article/p2p-84483792/>

(4) Keating, J. "If it Happened There: Americans To Elect Legislature." *Slate*. Nov 3, 2014. http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_world_/2014/11/03/if_it_happened_there_how_would_we_come_over_the_midterm_elections_if_they_happened.html

C. Two Required Fundraising Music Videos, per the below list:

Aid to Africa

(1) Band Aid, *Do They Know it's Christmas?* (UK, 1984)***
www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NLLAeNhH3k

Aid to Europe

(2) Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund: Africa for Norway, *Radi-Aid* (Norway, 2012) www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJLqyuxm96k

D. Key Readings Previously Assigned in the Course Prior to this Assignment

(1) Hallin, D. C. and P. Mancini. (2010). Western Media systems in comparative perspective. In Curran, J. (Ed). 2010. *Media and Society*, 5th Edition. London: Bloomsbury Academic Press. Chapter 5, pp. 102-122.

(2) Chapters in the Foreman Textbook concerning journalism and ethics.

* Other base chapters could be substituted that cover the same topic.

** Other articles could be substituted provided a spoof and base article cover comparable topics.

*** USA for Africa, *We Are the World* (US, 1985) may be used as a substitute to make the direct comparison for the Africa for Norway's Radi-Aid (in place of the Band Aid) music video. However, I find that video less useful in making the point to students, including per its being nearly double the length of that of the Band Aid video.

Appendix B: Time Required and Step-by-Step Guide for In-Class Discussion of and Corresponding *Ethics of International Reporting* Assignment

Time Required For In-Class Discussion

Approximately three hours are required for the in-class discussion portion of the assignment. One and a half hours are needed for step one (described below), and another one and a half hours for steps two through six. The latter can be shortened by using only one article each for the comparison.

Step-by-Step Guide for In Class Discussion and Corresponding Assignment

Step 1: Base Chapter Discussion

Begin discussion by asking students, “What is the Point of the Chapter?” As part of this initial discussion, review the importance of journalists understanding the culture and cultural context of those cultures they are covering—in their full nuance and meaning. It is important that journalists not focus on what *they* think matters or be guided consciously or not by stereotypes about others culture to, as a result, inadvertently focus on what ultimately, is not the issue of focus locally. Journalist should treat cultural coverage in the same way as they would when reporting on issues about which they are not experts, for example science. They should use all resources at their disposal to do an effective job. They should aim to write in a way that sounds like the article’s voice is coming *from* the community being covered rather than from the journalist writing *about* them. They should consider when to include race (as the book discusses), or more broadly, any and all identity features they choose to list. They, and so the students in the course, should consider, “Is it integral to the stories meaning to include identifying labels?” “What does including those labels add or subtract from my overall story?”

Step 2: American News Media Articles and Music Video Set Discussion

Follow-up the discussion about the base textbook chapter by screening and providing background context about Band Aid’s fundraising music video. Do so as a prompt, analogously, to discuss a *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* article. Explain to the students that the video was a campaign to raise funds for famine relief in Africa, and ask them to consider how it, and more specifically, the two articles, discuss Africans, Indians and Burkinabe society and politics, respectively. Ask them to explain what they understand to be the events in India and Burkina Faso described in the two articles.

Step 3: Spoof News Media Articles and Music Video Set Discussion

Screen and provide background context about the Radi-Aid fundraising spoof music video, that mocks fundraising efforts like that of Band Aid’s, as well as that of the 1985, USA for Africa’s “We Are the World” campaign by encouraging Africans to share their heat with Norwegians suffering from freezing winter weather-like conditions. Use the video as a prompt to analogously discuss two *Slate* spoof articles. Ask the students, “What do you think about this video? These articles?” “How do you feel about *Slate*’s coverage of the US?” “Does it adequately and fairly describe Thanksgiving’s customs and the history behind it?” “How about US Senate Elections, society and politics more broadly, did it respectfully and fairly describe those?”

Step 4: Comparison of Two Sets of News Articles

Ask students to compare and contrast the two article sets about national customs and political affairs. Explore with them whether they see any similarities between *Slate*’s coverage of American national customs with that of the *Washington Post* in its coverage of Indian national customs. Likewise, ask them whether they see any similarities between *Slate*’s description of political affairs in the US, with that of the *Los Angeles Times* description of Political Affairs in

Burkina Faso. To do so, begin by asking them to compare how the two videos depict other cultures in their fundraising efforts. Use this part of the discussion as a prompt to get them to more deeply engage with the articles. Begin by consecutively asking questions about each article as they relate to the SPJ code. The code states that journalists should, “Avoid stereotyping. Journalists should examine the ways their values and experiences may shape their reporting.” To that end, ask them “How is the country in the given article described?” “Was this issue, over another, deemed news out of any conscious or unconscious stereotypical motive?” “Was religion, sect, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability and/or other identity features mentioned in the article? If so, for what purpose?” Further, the code states, “Provide context. Take special care not to misrepresent or oversimplify in promoting, previewing or summarizing a story.” To that end, ask the students, “What context or background was provided about the country, and its people?” Finally, The Code states, “Boldly tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience. Seek sources whose voices we seldom hear.” To that end, ask the students, “Whose experiences and perspectives are summarized or specifically quoted in these articles?”

Step 5: Current and Historical Information about India and Burkina Faso

Weave current and historical background details about India and Burkina Faso into the comparative discussion with the students. As the conversation nears completion ask them, “What do you think about these articles now?” “Would you change anything about how they describe Indian and Burkinabe society and politics?” As a matter of context, provide the students with background information such as that describing Indian post-independence history, ethnopolitical relations and separatist conflicts. In particular, provide them with such background details as these pertain to the demographics and relations of the two identity groups labeled in the article, Hindus and Muslims. Ask the students, “What context, if any, was provided regarding Muslim-Hindu relations in India?” Was any mention made about colonial history, the partition of India, and/or the country’s historical relationship with Pakistan and Bangladesh, as context for the issue reported on in the article?” “For what purpose and when was the identity of subjects labeled as either Hindu or Muslim, and did this labeling add anything to the article?” “Was information equally provided by representatives of both groups, and how did the correspondent select which individuals they would use to represent each of these groups?”

Similarly, weave background details such as those describing the history of Burkina Faso post independence into the discussion. Ask the students, “Was context provided for the current political issue being described?” “Do we know from the article what happened in the realm of electoral politics since independence?” “Was a movement of popular protesters described?” “Was the ouster of the previous regime, including as it relates more broadly to the current leadership transition and democratization included for context?” “Is the article told from a particular stereotypical perspective about “Africa?”” “Does the article describe the ethnopolitical make-up of Burkina Faso and any history of conflict?” “Does that make-up and history resemble that which is found in most African countries?” “Do you know how Burkina Faso compares to most African countries?” “Has there been any history of ethnopolitical conflict, or conflict otherwise in Burkina Faso since independence?”

Step 6: Re-Write an American News Article Homework Assignment

Conclude the discussion by asking the students whether they would change anything about either the *Washington Post* or *Los Angeles Times* articles. Specifically, ask them whether they would change the type or amount of context provided, the terminology used, the order of information as provided, the use of identifying labels, photographs, headlines, and/or anything else. Assign the students the choice to re-write one or the other of these American news media articles. Tell them to engage in a close re-reading of the article they select, and to revise it accordingly thereafter (see Appendix C for assignment instructions).

Appendix C: Instructions for *Ethics of International Reporting* Assignment

Instructions: Consider Chapter 17: “Covering a Diverse, Multicultural Society”, and the four articles you were required to read, and the two videos we watched in class, along with our corresponding discussion. Compare and contrast the two articles about national customs; and separate of those, the two covering political affairs. Select either the *Washington Post* article about national customs or the *Los Angeles Times* article about political affairs and re-write the entirety of one of these articles by best adhering to the SPJ Code of Ethics, and drawing on any additional considerations concerning our discussion about relative (versus universal) ethics and comparative media systems (versus the American Liberal media system).

Appendix D: Four Required Articles for *Ethics of International Reporting* Assignment

- (1) American and Spoof National Customs Articles for Direct Comparison
- (2) American and Spoof Political Affairs Articles for Direct Comparison