



## It's (Not) In the Syllabus: Contradiction and Construction of the Ethical Media Professional

Patrick R. Johnson  
*Marquette University*

### ABSTRACT

This study looks at how 27 journalism and mass communication (JMC) ethics syllabi from geographically diverse colleges and universities define what it means to be an ethical media professional. Using critical discourse analysis and Bloom's taxonomy to assess the course descriptions and objectives, I find that the syllabi predominantly use lower-order taxonomic language. Thus, the JMC ethics courses focus on understanding who could be an ethical media professional, not how to be an ethical media professional. This means that despite the complex knowledge associated with ethics as a discipline, media JMC ethics syllabi present a baseline and basic understanding of who may be a media professional rather than learning how to enact and practice ethical behaviors. A lack of taxonomic language associated with application and creation reveals a growing need to reevaluate how the syllabi are constructed to improve ethics education and the JMC professions.

Journalism and mass communication (JMC) schools annually graduate what they describe as ethical media professionals. These newly minted media producers venture into a vast workforce that could include any number of outlets, from traditional print media and digital journalism to advertising copywriting and internal corporate communications. Regardless of the professional placement, journalism and mass communication educators take it upon themselves to inculcate a sense of right and wrong in their pre-service students. While several courses across journalism and mass communication education evoke a conversation surrounding ethical behavior or moral decision-making, the most dedicated to that training are courses

strictly defined as journalism, media, or communication ethics.

Even though cadres of journalism and mass communication graduates receive some form of education in ethics, there needs to be more connection with this education in the broader understanding of the moral foundations of the media to the audiences they serve. Trust in journalism is nearly the lowest in American history (Toft *et al.*, 2021). Consistent calls for racial and gendered reform in newsrooms are elevated. The #MeToo movement specifically struck the media industries at their core. Moreover, swift and immediate coverage of events leads to issues of accuracy and lasting influences on the perception of news media

**Keywords:** Syllabi, Ethics, Bloom's Taxonomy, Objectives, Education

in the public sphere. This paper addresses the communication, journalism, and media ethics classrooms. It focuses on the curricular contract between instructor and student: the syllabus. Through an analysis of 27 syllabi in the United States from 2019-2021, this study attempts to grasp how journalism and mass communication schools define what it means to be ethical media professionals.

### Literature Review

In the late 1970s, Clifford Christians and Catherine Covert set out to understand the teaching of ethics in journalism education. Their study, arguably still the most comprehensive look at ethics in journalism education, highlighted the professional responsibilities of journalists as they relate to what is taught or socialized in the ethics classroom. In doing so, the duo finds that the ethics classroom is where there is the most dissonance between the purpose of education and the professional demands of journalism. Despite the report being over 40 years old, media ethics scholars have yet to take a similar look to that of Christians and Covert (1980). While substantial work is done, particularly in the areas of research and professional connections, the emphasis on teaching and curricular materials needs to be more present in media ethics work, and thus, this study is necessary.

The ethics classroom is where pre-service media professionals can learn about moral development (Goree, 2000). Despite contention between professional journalists and journalism educators about what should be included in an education in journalism (Folkerts, 2014), an agreement among them is that education is a way in which a profession is formed (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003). JMC educators emphasize normative values in the classroom and attend to professional skill-building. Duties are fostered through classroom strategies and standards, which are practiced and learned. In the classroom environment, there is more structure for how professional duties are developed, understood, and sustained (Richardson, 1994). Professional journalists disagree. Instead, they see the classroom experiences absent of on-the-job training (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003; Folkerts, 2014). Despite the contention, Evetts (2003) contends that the journalism classroom's different approaches to learning and diverse strategies are where professionalism can be taught and internalized. Ultimately, the learning process professionalizes ethical practices, values, and normative behaviors.

### The Syllabus as Text

Since most institutions require a syllabus, there is institutional power behind creating one. There is also instructional power, as they are the deciders of what knowledge is included in the document. The syllabus can dictate how students approach and perceive a class (Eberly *et al.*, 2001). Nevertheless, the syllabus is rarely defined as a text for analysis, and the power dynamic among institutions, instructors, and students must be studied more. Moreover, when studied, it is often in the confines of educational spaces and journals and not extended to content-specific places.

Much of the research about syllabi focuses on what should be included or excluded in the document (Gin *et al.*, 2021; DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005). Other research shows that the document can communicate power and purpose. Several strategies are performed through the language of the syllabus. These would include welcoming strategies, which emphasize creating a feeling of positivity and general acquaintance with the course material; tension-balancing strategies, which situate the instructor's authority and negotiate the power dynamic; and presentational strategies, which provide places of focus and attention for students (Thompson, 2007).

The syllabus also embodies a contract between the student and instructor and the broader educational institution (Doolittle & Lusk, 2007). Not only is it the first encounter students have with the instructor and course, but it is also a way to build foundational relationships between student and instructor. This relationship is developed through a common language meant to be accessible to all students. The syllabus is an equalizing document (Ovink & Veazy, 2011) and a place where cultural capital is learned and established (Bourdieu, 1986). The syllabus creates a place where students are explicitly provided with advantages, knowledge, and skills. This includes ways in which norms are established both in the classroom and in the profession the class is socializing the students in (Eberly *et al.*, 2001). The syllabus also is a place where inclusivity can be addressed. The inclusion of diversity and inclusion statements, as well as information about discrimination and disabilities, is essential for students to understand the classroom culture. They also maximize students' identities and their place in their future careers (Katz, 2020; Lund *et al.*, 2014). Syllabi are more than an organizational document; they are a means of socializing students to their future professions by providing them with the cultural capital and

**Table 1**

| SCHOOL                                      | COURSE TITLE                                  |
|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| American University                         | Journalism Ethics                             |
| Baylor University                           | Media Law and Ethics                          |
| University of Colorado Boulder              | Moral Psychology (graduate)                   |
| University of Colorado Boulder              | Sustainable Brands                            |
| University of Dayton                        | Journalism Ethics and Values                  |
| University of Dayton                        | Communication Ethics (graduate)               |
| Duquesne University                         | Ethical Issues in Media (graduate)            |
| Duquesne University                         | Media Ethics                                  |
| University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  | Journalism Ethics and Diversity               |
| University of Iowa                          | Media Ethics and Diversity                    |
| The George Washington University            | Journalism Ethics                             |
| Lesley University                           | Communication Ethics                          |
| University of Louisville                    | Ethical Problems in Communication             |
| Messiah University                          | Media Law and Ethics                          |
| University of Missouri                      | Media Ethics (graduate)                       |
| Northeastern University                     | Ethics and Issues in Journalism               |
| Northwestern University                     | Media Law and Ethics                          |
| Ohio University                             | Ethics, Media and Society                     |
| Pennsylvania State University               | News Media Ethics                             |
| Quinnipiac University                       | Law and Ethics in Public Relations (graduate) |
| University of Tennessee                     | Media Ethics                                  |
| University of Texas at Austin               | Communication Ethics                          |
| University of Florida                       | Ethics and Problems in Mass Communication     |
| University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill | Media Ethics                                  |
| University of Toledo                        | Media Ethics                                  |
| University of Southern California           | Journalism Ethics Goes to the Movies          |
| University of Wisconsin-Madison             | Law and Ethics of Communication (graduate)    |

norms that will make them the most successful.

Journalism and mass communication scholarship do not often address the syllabus as a text for analysis. Perreault (2015) looked at media and religion syllabi. His study found diversity in approaches, but a general sense of religious literacy and cultural appreciation was shared through the courses he analyzed. Heckman and Homan (2020) addressed gender parity in their analysis, learning that women are likelier to assign female authors to their syllabus. They claim that the journalism and mass communication course syllabi may harm females in JMC programs. They believe that the lack of women in syllabi further delegitimizes women in journalism and is a visual gatekeeper for female students looking to enter the profession. Nelson and Edgerly (2021) wanted to understand how journalism and mass communication instructors talk about audiences in their syllabi. Despite the audience turn in journalism, the course syllabi must be completed. In Turkish classrooms, there is consensus from the syllabi that ethics and morality, self-regulation, professional ethics, and theories of ethics are prioritized. How ethics is taught in Turkey is more contentious, with the analysis revealing the interests of the instructor and journalism ethics dominating the syllabus discourse (Çaplı & Taş, 2018). This study seeks to go beyond the Turkish study to explore what is taught, what the syllabus says about what it means to be an ethical media professional, and how diversity is addressed in the curriculum. Given this, I ask: *How do JMC instructors define what it means to be an ethical media professional?*

### Method

For this paper, I collected ethics syllabi from journalism and mass communication instructors around the United States and Canada for courses taught since the Fall 2019. To achieve geographic and programmatic diversity, syllabi were solicited from members of AEJMC's Media Ethics Division and from faculty at journalism programs that are consistently considered top in the nation ("2020 Best Colleges for Communications in America," 2020; Nelson & Edgerly, 2021). This sample includes 27 syllabi from private and public institutions' undergraduate and graduate classes and spans various departments, from communication to journalism to advertising to public relations. The syllabi represent various course levels, with courses ranging from sophomore level (n=2) to upper division (n=19) and graduate level (n=6). Using Nel-

son and Edgerly (2021) as a model, this study “sets out to examine broader trends within journalism education, rather than individual journalism programs” (p. 4). Like Nelson and Edgerly, I chose not to refer to specific programs in discussing my findings. Table 1 includes a complete list of programs and the name(s) of the course syllabi submitted for this study.

Because the syllabus is a contract between instructor and student (Doolittle & Lusk, 2007), there is inherent power in and behind the discourse constructed within its pages (Fairclough, 2014). The power dynamic and definitional labor in a syllabus

makes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) an appropriate method for this study. Critical discourse analysis comes from language studies and linguistics traditions, aiming to participate in a more extensive discussion surrounding social change (Fairclough, 2014). The theory seeks to impact or enact social processes or change (Fairclough, 2014). These interactions explain how power shapes discourses (van Dijk, 2013a). CDA develops connections and relationships outside and within discourse (Gee, 2014), situates one’s positionality as a means of analysis (Fairclough, 2014), and processes how representation and ideolo-

**Table 2: Coding Terms and Bloom’s taxonomy**

| Level |               | Definition                                                                                                                                     | Coding Terms/ Verbs                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-------|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1     | Remembering   | Exhibit memory of previously learned material by recalling facts, terms, basic concepts, and answers.                                          | Choose OR Define OR Find OR How OR Label OR Learn OR List OR Match OR Name OR Omit OR Recall OR Remember OR Select OR Spell OR Tell OR What OR When OR Where OR Which OR Who OR Why                                                                                                                                                              |
| 2     | Understanding | Demonstrate understanding of facts and ideas by organizing, comparing, translating, interpreting, giving descriptions, and stating main ideas. | Classify OR Demonstrate OR Explain OR Extend OR Illustrate OR Outline OR Relate OR Rephrase OR Show OR Summarize OR Translate OR Understand OR Write                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 3     | Applying      | Solve problems in new situations by applying acquired knowledge, facts, techniques, and rules differently.                                     | Apply OR Develop OR Experiment OR Identify OR Interview OR Model OR Organize OR Plan OR Practice OR Recognize OR Solve OR Use OR Utilize OR Work                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 4     | Analyzing     | Examine and break information into parts by identifying motives or causes. Make inferences and find evidence to support generalizations.       | Analyze OR Assume OR Categorize OR Compare OR Contrast OR Discover OR Dissect OR Distinguish OR Divide OR Examine OR Function OR Inference OR Inspect OR Motive OR Relationships OR Research OR Simplify OR Survey OR Take part OR Test OR Theme                                                                                                 |
| 5     | Evaluating    | Present and defend opinions by making judgments about information, validity of ideas, or quality of work based on criteria.                    | Agree OR Appraise OR Assess OR Award OR Conclude OR Criteria OR Criticize OR Decide OR Deduct OR Defend OR Determine OR Disprove OR Estimate OR Evaluate OR Importance OR Influence OR Interpret OR Judge OR Justify OR Mark OR Measure OR Opinion OR Perceive OR Prioritize OR Prove OR Rate OR Recommend OR Rule OR Select OR Support OR Value |
| 6     | Creating      | Compile information together in a different way by combining elements in a new pattern or proposing an alternative.                            | Adapt OR Build OR Change OR Combine OR Compile OR Compose OR Construct OR Create OR Delete OR Design OR Discuss OR Elaborate OR Formulate OR Happen OR Imagine OR Improve OR Invent OR Make OR Maximize OR Minimize OR Modify OR Original OR Originate OR Predict OR Propose OR Solution OR Synthesize OR Theory                                 |

gy exist within texts (van Dijk, 2013a). Journalists are “able to influence the public” and have “preferential access” (van Dijk, 2013b, p. 68). Journalism is an ideal place to critically evaluate this privilege (van Dijk, 2013b; Carvalho, 2008). The desire to examine media through power relations is essential to connecting it to critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2013b). This study attempts to interrogate the conversations that develop media, particularly the education of media professionals. Media and communication ethics courses provide a place where students learn and engage about their future professions.

Using a grounded approach in line with critical discourse analysis (Carvalho, 2008), the corpus of texts was first taken as a whole and understood for what they can contribute to the conversation about ethics and ethics education. The corpus of texts included well over 300 pages of content; therefore, reducing the units for analysis was required to engage in a deeper understanding of the power and ideologies embedded within the language of the syllabi (Carvalho, 2008). Two final readings focused on course descriptions and objectives and specifically on how the use of taxonomic language not only constructs the idea of an ethical professional but also furthers the educational mission of the instructor by outlining the level at which a student should be an ethical professional from the course. MAXQDA aided this reading. The “goals and objectives” data was uploaded to MAXQDA and then coded for the six levels of Bloom’s taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Table 2 outlines this information. The lists of taxonomic verbs were used as search terms to be coded. To find all matches for the coding, “include stemmed words” was selected.

Bloom’s initial six levels are cognitive processes. The use of Bloom’s taxonomy as an additional level of analysis of the texts shows the power behind the language. While instructors offer several purposes and learning outcomes in their courses through their syllabi language, the true power behind the language is in the taxonomic level they have identified that information as being. This paper argues that the course description and objectives define what it means to be an ethical professional. However, the construction of that and the value placed on the facets of that definition are constructed through the educational language choices guided by and from Bloom’s taxonomy. Therefore, a closer analysis using Bloom strengthened the analysis of this paper. What emerged from this

process follows.

### How syllabi construct an ethical professional

The 27 syllabi analyzed for this paper provide a glimpse into what ideologies are taught, shared, and reinforced in the ethics curriculum. However, these ideologies reach beyond the confines of the syllabus as they are stand-ins for a much more extensive understanding of the state of journalism and media ethics broadly. These syllabi represent a relationship of power, where the instructors teach students how to act once they begin their journey as media professionals.

### Course Descriptions

The course descriptions situate *problems in* versus *problems of* media ethics. The course descriptions share two distinct practices in their attempt to contextualize what will be learned. They pose problems in the field of journalism and mass communication. They also identify the problems of the professionals. The problems in the field, according to several course descriptions, are broader and can “shape human communication,” as one syllabus notes. These problems include “current and past issues in political, interpersonal, business, and media communication issues.” They also are about a “large element of logic.” These field problems are closely tied to the ethical theories and “traditions of philosophy.” When course descriptions explore the professionals’ problems, they focus on examples and specific practices. This would include “thinking: specifically, clearly-stated reasoning and analysis,” “explor[ing] the reasoning behind why you believe journalists and strategic communicators ought to behave a certain way,” and “including the tensions that are created in situations where values are in conflict.”

The syllabi course descriptions engage in a discourse that ethics is not easy, nor is acting upon or identifying right or wrong. Course descriptions rely heavily on theories and philosophies as justification for exploring media’s ethical quandaries. The descriptions share that students will use the philosophical foundations to explain case studies and theories, providing context to specific values or behaviors of an ethical media professional. Instructors often attach philosophies and theories to argument and critical thinking in their course descriptions. The use of logic implies that one cannot be without the other. Even though ethical principles are identified as being prominent in nearly every course description, their introduction in the descriptions is often coupled with their limitation.

In fact, “there’s more to our profession than just the ‘how to.’” Another syllabus provided similar commentary. Instead of referencing the philosophies, theories, and principles as possible how-tos, this instructor believes they offer a chance to explore. For this instructor, students are cautioned that these frameworks are the end-all-be-all by stating: “Those who come seeking a rule book to guide their conduct as media workers will be disappointed here.” These frameworks are the foundation for constructing the ethical media profession. Another necessary means to develop an ethical media professional is using a specific tense in the course descriptions.

The course descriptions emphasize a future focus with language choices stimulating a forward-thinking approach to learning. Often, words like “will,” “future,” and “to be” are used to share the idea that students are learning and that becoming an ethical professional is something that happens beyond the walls of the classroom. Additionally, the use of future-tense verbs is coupled with descriptions and expectations of work, such as “responsibilities,” “the real world,” and “long-term.” This use of future-focused thinking in the course descriptions prescribes that what will occur in the course is something that is meant to be lasting, not something that is meant simply to be remembered, tested, and ultimately forgotten. The emphasis on individual practice versus globalized issues identified in the course descriptions, in conjunction with the emphasis on forward-thinking language coupled with foundational philosophies of the past, situates ethics as complex.

### *Course Objectives and Goals*

The 27 syllabi included 149 different course objectives. The course objectives included a taxonomic verb from Bloom’s taxonomy to frame the objective for the student readers. In some cases, the taxonomic verbs and the goals being established were shrouded in commentary as to why the objective existed; however, in most cases, the objectives were straightforward and a singular declarative sentence. Given the structure’s purpose, these objectives convey a purpose of direction. With that direction is an outcome: what students will learn by the end of the JMC ethics course.

In the 149 course objectives, 158 taxonomic verbs were coded for the level of Bloom’s taxonomy they belonged within. When divided in half, Bloom’s taxonomy can be understood as lower- and higher-order thinking. The lower-order thinking includes remem-

bering, understanding, and applying. The instances of lower-order taxonomic verbs used in the objectives make up the majority of objectives (n=122; 77.21%). The higher-order thinking includes analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Only 36 (22.79%) instances were higher-order thinking verbs used in the language of the objectives.

The lowest level, remembering, included 20 references (12.66%). The remembering objectives often focused on what students will “learn about” or “become familiar with.” Some of these objectives focused very broadly on fields. For example, one objective shared that students will “learn the role of ethics in interpersonal communication, group communication, and mass communication. Other objectives emphasized more conceptual understanding, such as “learn the meaning of truth and its role in journalistic endeavors, both informational and strategic.” And some objectives were incredibly vague in what the outcome students will learn. An example of this being “learn new ways of seeing.”

The second lowest level, understanding, had the most uses at 52 (32.91%). This included students being able to grasp foundational material while also being able to explain it. As an example, students will “articulate the central tenants of the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics and the elements of excellent journalism” or “understand how new mediums, such as the web, raise both novel and ancient ethical issues (in admittedly new forms).” Most consistently, when understanding taxonomic verbs are used, philosophical theories and frameworks are attached to them in the language of the objective. This includes straightforward means like “identify and understand philosophical principles applicable to mass communication” and more nuanced and specific ways like “explain your ethical approaches and reasoning about a particular dilemma in terms that a diverse group of people can understand.” Diversity is also a familiar concept attached to lower-order verbs of understanding. Not only does the previous example apply, but others include “understand the importance of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, politics and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in our society in news coverage, advertising and PR content, and staffing,” as well as to “understand the global diversity of peoples and cultures and how it impacts our news and information, and strategic communication messages.”

Applying verbs (n=50; 31.62%) account for the

second most frequently used in the objectives. The use of these verbs implies moving from lower-order thinking toward high-order thinking. This includes being able to “apply knowledge and defend your perspective in group discussions, written reports, and group presentations,” “work through a model of ethical decision making,” and “apply philosophy and frameworks to current media concerns and controversies.” Applying verbs concerning course content focuses on dilemmas and problem-solving. Emphasis on ethical decision-making in these course objectives is like the course descriptions. The ability to “apply [ethical theories] to situations” is essential at this level. According to these objectives, finding and explaining an ethical solution is a priority. One objective describes that this application is necessary for “intellectual, professional, and personal dimensions of life.” As the use of taxonomic verbs shifts from lower-order thinking to higher-order thinking, the objectives engage in different purposes with application, being the last of the lower-order Bloom taxonomy verbs, starting the transition toward the use of ethics in JMC professional careers.

The objectives that focus on higher-order concerns—analyzing, evaluating, and creating—make up less than a quarter of all the objectives in the syllabi. The frequency of each diminishes the higher the level, with analyzing included in 15 (9.49%) objectives, evaluating in 14 (8.86%), and creating in 7 (4.43%). Much like applying verbs, analyzing verbs are used most often in conjunction with solving ethical dilemmas and issues. Most of the analyzing objectives could have used applying verbs as they did not address what is being analyzed beyond the ability to apply ethical theory to dilemmas. This analysis leads to decision-making in “various communication fields.” However, it does not do much more than application—even though in Bloom’s taxonomy, they are represented as analysis being a growth from application. Only in one objective was diversity mentioned; the remaining analyzing objectives focus on the ability to address issues.

Evaluating verbs are associated with critical thinking as a higher-order strategy. Critiquing is vital in these objectives, but what is being critiqued is defined broadly. For example, one objective reads, “think critically, creatively, and independently.” Another claim is that students will “interpret and critique common elements of media ethics codes and practices.” The importance of criticism as evaluation, as

another objective reads, is to “engage in an ethical and socially responsible dialogue regarding problems and problem-solving.” Similar to analysis, the evaluating objectives do little more than application; however, the shift in the language used here is the criticism of the practices being applied.

According to Bloom’s taxonomy, creating as an instructional strategy requires the most substantial higher-order thinking. However, this sophistication is rarely identified in the course objectives. When creating verbs are included, the objectives focus on students doing something with the information they learned in the ethics course, such as “design a study” or “build a personal code of ethics.” When the creating language is used, it is not always done with authenticity. Creating language is partnered with applying language. In one example, students are told they will “make ethical decisions using decision-making tools....” In this case, “make” implies creating, but what follows in this objective is “...to guide your analysis of complex issues.” The make, despite being a creating verb, is a caveat to the ability of students to perform an analysis. Another objective reads that the course will “provide students with the tools to locate their own, theory-driven ethical perspective.” The creating verb here is theory; however, the genuine use of the taxonomic language in this objective is “provide.”

### **Who is the ethical media professional?**

In addition, the features of the syllabi establish who an ethical media professional *should* be. Even though this person will not be who the students are at the end of the course, there is still a definition to be shared. There is a need to acknowledge that in constructing a syllabus, there is an inherent optimism or near romanticism of what *could* be accomplished in creating a course. Furthermore, this optimism is traditionally reflected in the course description. While in some cases, the course descriptions in the syllabi analyzed offered a place for grandstanding, they are most appropriately understood as an instructor’s desire to share what, ideally, the students will walk away with having learned. However, this idealism is where fruitful contradiction occurs. A course description’s idealism practically opposes a course’s pedagogical construction in its objectives. The hope is that this contradiction does not exist and that the connection from one element to the next is a building block for students and their instructors to develop educational relationships. However, this is not the case. In their attempt to romanticize the field

of media ethics, the course descriptions are setting up the pedagogical contract of the syllabus to define what it means to be an ethical professional. Nevertheless, the instructional strategies outlined in the course objectives combat that definition. In a sense, the instructional elements say that while there is an identity of an ethical media professional, one can gather from the course description that the ideal professional is not going to emerge by the conclusion of the course.

The syllabi show that an ethical media professional is well-versed in Western philosophies and can understand and apply those philosophies to several issues and dilemmas. The ethical media professional engages in ethical decision-making using consistent practice, simulated by case studies of topics. While the ethical media professional often has uniqueness based on the type of medium they work for and within, the syllabi construct a broader and more universal authority. Ethical media professionals can approach different situations because they have experienced many topics and values throughout the semester. They can even participate in conversations about complex concerns that develop as cultural milestones, like the Black Lives Matter movement.

Moreover, this ethical media professional is concerned with relationships, privacy, trust, and democracy. They are not people who seek to harm or be biased or manipulated. Instead, according to the syllabi, the ethical media professional navigates situations that include these negative values by utilizing their argumentation and critical thinking skills. Anyone could be an ethical media professional if they understand the foundations of ethics and have developed a solid ability to argue for prosocial values and practice. The proper distinction is not in what they know or learn but in what they do. An ethical media professional *could be* a good citizen of the world who happens to work in the media industry.

While the syllabi share that critical thinking and argumentation are core components to the ethics curriculum and being an ethical professional, there needs to be more identification about the transmissibility of these skills to personal lives. While one can assume that is a given, the language does not explicitly make this connection. How the courses are designed implies they exhibit media literacy, especially given the substantial attention to how topics outlined in the course schedule are explored and how course descriptions identify the need for students to be media consumers. However, the lack of connection to personal

decision-making mitigates the ability for the values of these courses to be explored and utilized in everyday life. This becomes a contradiction. If an ethical media professional is just an ethical person employed by the media industry, then why not address the applicability of this content in one's personal life? Most of these courses are upper-division and graduate-level, which means the emphasis is on the profession the students will enter. This is possibly why the syllabi do not engage with personal growth and reflection as an essential outcome of these ethics courses. However, since none of the courses list a prerequisite for a philosophy of ethics course (of any kind), these ethics courses may be the only ones students take. Suppose this is the only one that students possibly take. In that case, there is a burden to shoulder as instructors that they are not simply developing ethical media professionals. However, they are also helping their students become more ethical daily. However, the language in the syllabi does not develop this ideology or connection because the taxonomic language does not show any performative or productive element beyond one's ability to remember or understand. This does not discount the ability to do these actions in a classroom. However, it says that by the end of the course, the definition of an ethical media professional is one *to know or understand* and that the professions students *will* enter are how they will *become*.

### **Educating toward a more ethical future**

Evaluating and analyzing syllabi is not an everyday activity among journalism and mass communication scholars. The stark division between the education inside and the outside scholarship is nearly church and state within JMC programs. This study shows that the education we perform within our institutions says something about the career we envision our students should belong. By teaching about the future, we comment on the present and past. Since the syllabi are for pre-service media professionals, the current discussions in these classrooms about what is happening in the past and present in journalism are developing the future of the institutions. What JMC instructors are defining in their syllabi, a contract between them and their students, is the institution they are imagining.

The concern here should be two-fold. The first should allow us to question to what extent ethics can be learned in a classroom if the language being contracted between teacher and student focuses primarily on a basic level of understanding. If "to understand" is

the primary objective, are we training students to be ethical media professionals? Or are we simply training them to know what an ethical media professional is? The second concern is more about the authorship of the syllabi. Is the taxonomic language being used in the syllabi reflective of the outcomes in the course, or is there a use of language without the explicit desire to make a high-order connection? The syllabi used in this study offer a glimpse at how vital these educational documents can be to understanding how our educational institutions frame the profession's future. The language shows that JMC ethics classes share what an ethical professional could be but are not engaging students in the process and production of being an ethical professional. The taxonomic language does not differ broadly based on the level either. One may assume that the higher the course level is offered, the more likely the more sophisticated taxonomic language is used. However, that isn't the case. The syllabus shares what will come for these students, not practice how to be it. Suppose we are to respond to this in the future, especially given how easy it is for anyone to be a media creator/producer in our ubiquitous media environment. In that case, we must shift our syllabi to "evaluate" and "create."

### Limitations

There are hundreds of JMC programs around the United States; this paper only focuses on 27. Additionally, I address only programs located in the United States; therefore, I do not claim to generalize to all ethics courses. Instead, I choose to use this paper to begin a conversation about how our scholarship can contribute to a better education and how our education can contribute to a more equitable and inclusive future in journalism and media.

Additionally, professors will continue to rely on the phrase "it's in the syllabus." The reliance on this, while utilizing social media and meeting spaces to reflect on students not reading the syllabus, is a limitation of this study. It is a limitation because it is a philosophical underpinning to education. Until we reflect more critically on our scholarship of journalism and mass communication teaching and make our curricular moves more explicit to students, the philosophy will limit us. Students may be unfamiliar with the nuances of taxonomic language; they are probably entirely unfamiliar. Much like we train them to become critical readers of the news and information, we must dispel the myth that students will not read the syllabus

and provide them with literacy that helps them build a more sustainable educational infrastructure. Furthermore, in the process, reframe this limitation to strengthen our teaching and learning of journalism and mass communication.

### References

- Aldridge, M., & Evetts, J. (2003). Rethinking the Concept of Professionalism: the case of journalism. *British Journal of Sociology*, 54(4), 547-64. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2003.00547.x>.
- Anderson, L. W., & Krathwohl, D. R. (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing*, Abridged Edition. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bourdieu, P. The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (p. 241-258). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Çaplı, B., & Taş, O. (2018). Problems in media ethics education: An assessment of syllabi of undergraduate courses in Turkey. *Istanbul University Journal of Communication Sciences*, 55, 61-76. <https://doi.org/10.26650/CONNECTIST2018-0014>.
- Carvalho, A. (2008). Media(ted) discourse and society: Rethinking the framework of critical discourse analysis. *Journalism Studies*, 9(2), 161-177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700701848162>.
- Christians, C., & Covert, C. (1980). *Teaching Ethics in journalism education*. New York: Hastings Center Monographs, 1980.
- DiClementi, J. D. and Handelsman, M. M. (2005). Empowering students: Class-generated course rules. *Teaching of Psychology*, 32(1), 18-21. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15328023top3201\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15328023top3201_4).
- Doolittle, P. E., & Lusk, D. L. (2007). The effects of institutional classification and gender on faculty inclusion of syllabus components. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 7(2), 62-78.
- Eberly, M. B., Newton, S. E., & Wiggins, R. A. (2001). The syllabus as a tool for student-centered learning. *Journal of General Education*, 50(1), 56-74. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jge.2001.0003>.

- Evetts, J. (2003). The sociological analysis of professionalism. Occupational change in a modern world. *International Sociology*, 18(2), 395–415. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580903018002005>.
- Fairclough, (2014). *Language and power* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). New York: Routledge.
- Fairclough, N. L., & Wodak, R. (1997). Critical discourse analysis. In van Dijk, T. A. (ed.), *Discourse studies. A multidisciplinary introduction: Vol. 2. Discourse as social interaction* (pp. 258–284). London, England: Sage.
- Folkerts, J. (2014). History of journalism education. *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, 16(4), 227–299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1522637914541379>.
- Gee, J. P. (2014). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (4<sup>th</sup> edition). New York: Routledge.
- Gin, L. E., Scott, R. A., Pfeiffer, L. D., Zheng, Y., Cooper, K. M., & Brownell, S. E. (2021). It's in the syllabus...or is it? How biology syllabi can serve as communication tools for creating inclusive classrooms at a large-enrollment research institution. *Advances in Physiology Education*, 45(2), 224–240. <https://doi.org/10.1152/advan.00119.2020>.
- Goree, K. (2000). Teaching moral development in journalism education. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 15(2), 101–114. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327728JMME1502\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327728JMME1502_4).
- Heckman, M., & Homan, M. (2020). The syllabus is a boys' club: The paucity of woman authors in journalism course materials. *Teaching Journalism & Mass Communication*, 10(2), 15–21.
- Katz, B. (2020 June 17). Inclusive practices: Syllabus and day one. *AMS Blogs*. <https://blogs.ams.org/inclusionexclusion/2019/08/30/inclusive-practices-syllabus-and-day-one/>.
- Lund Dean, K., & Fornaciari, C. J. (2014). The 21<sup>st</sup>-century syllabus: Tips for putting andragogy into practice. *Journal of Management Education*, 38(5), 724–732. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562913504764>.
- Nelson, J. L., & Edgerly, S. (2021). The (ir)relevance of audience studies in journalism education. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 77(2), 177–189. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776958211044885>.
- Ovink, S. M., & Veazey, B. D. (2011). More than “getting us through:” A case study in cultural capital enrichment of underrepresented minority undergraduates. *Research in Higher Education*, 52(4), 370–394. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-010-9198-8>.
- Perreault, G. (2015). Teaching religion and media: Syllabi and pedagogy. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 14(3), 128–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2013.791548>.
- Richardson, V. (1994). Conducting research on practice. *Educational Researcher*, 23(5), 5–10. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X023005005>.
- Thompson, B. (2007) The syllabus as a communication document: Constructing and presenting the syllabus. *Communication Education*, 56(1), 54–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520601011575>.
- Toff, B., Badrinathan, S., Mont'Alverne, C., Arguedas, A. R., Fletcher, R., & Nielsen, R. K. (2021). Overcoming indifference: What attitudes towards news tell us about building trust. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/overcoming-indifference-what-attitudes-towards-news-tell-us-about-building-trust>.
- van Dijk, T. (2013a). *CDA is NOT a method of critical discourse analysis*. Retrieved from <http://www.ed-isoportal.org/debate/115-cda-not-method-critical-discourse-analysis>
- van Dijk, T. A. (2013b). Discourse, power and access. In Caldas-Coulthard, C. R., Coulthard, M. (Eds.), *Texts and practices: Readings in critical discourse analysis* (pp. 93–113). London, England: Routledge.
- Patrick R. Johnson ([patrick.johnson@marquette.edu](mailto:patrick.johnson@marquette.edu)) studies the intersection of news literacy, journalism practice, and journalism education, with emphases on news literacy as ethical behavior and how we learn about and from media. He spends much of his time addressing questions of equity and inclusion, focusing his attention to issues of LGBTQ+ knowledge production and representation and texts related to sex and sexuality. He is also a research affiliate of Trusting News, where he helps focus on sustainable systems of journalism and improving community trust in the news.