

Media Ethics

Course code: JRN 352

Term and year: Spring 2026

Day and time: Wednesday 15:00-17:45

Instructor: David Vaughan

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Consultation hours: After class, any time by email, text, What's App; phone call by arrangement

Credits US/ECTS	3/6	Level	Intermediate
Length	15 weeks	Prerequisite	None
Contact hours	42 hours	Course type	JC required, HSC, PS, Elective

1. Course Description

Why media ethics? What happens with society if media ethics principles are not followed? What role has media ethics played in the history of journalism? Is this role changing? What are the guidelines for today's media organisations? What can we do when state or other players are spreading misinformation, lies or half-truths? What is propaganda and how can it be resisted? What are the obligations of the state towards a free media? Does this differ at different times and places? Is there still a role for the traditional "gatekeepers"? Does the term "public-service media" still have meaning? Do private and commercial media organizations have an obligation to be balanced? Is there such a thing as truth in journalism? How do we check facts? Is it possible to avoid bias and hidden prejudice? Is there a gap between what we are saying as journalists and what we think we are saying? What are the responsibilities of the individual journalist? What are the dangers of self-censorship and of collective self-censorship? How do we apply our own moral compass? What are the obligations of the journalist in times of conflict? How do we juggle with information, entertainment, sensation and persuasion?

These are all things that we need to bear in mind in discussing media ethics.

Many studies suggest that media freedom is in decline in countries across the world – but at the same time we have access to more sources than ever before. What are the paradoxes and contradictions of today's media world?

2. Student Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course students will have a clear understanding of and practical experience in:

- the broad ethical principles that drive professional media, particularly journalism in its various forms.
- the history of propaganda and of the debate around media ethics
- producing journalism that reflects an active awareness of these principles
- identifying the consequence and differences between truth, fact, and opinion - and their use in journalism.

- identifying techniques of persuasion used by politicians and other actors in society, identifying misinformation and fake news, identifying the manipulation of material

3. Reading Material

Required Materials

- BBC Producers Guidelines, <https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/guidelines>
- Czech Radio ethical codex, 2004
- SPJ (Society of Professional Journalists), <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>
- Reuters Standards and Values, http://handbook.reuters.com/index.php?title=Standards_and_Values
- RTDNA (Radio Television Digital News Association) Code of Ethics, <https://www.rtdna.org/ethics>
- Battle for the Airwaves, David Vaughan (Radioservis and Cook Communications, 2008)
- The Ethical Journalist, Third Edition, (Wiley Blackwell, 2022)
- Media Now, Ninth Edition (Cengage Learning, 2016)
- The Origins of Totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt, (first published 1951, Penguin Modern Classics, 2017)

Recommended Materials

- "Power Without Responsibility", James Curran and Jean Seaton (Routledge 1997)
- Should We Believe Wikipedia?, Amy S. Bruckman, Cambridge University Press, 2022
- At each lecture, students will be required to read an article related to the respective topic, especially related to the case studies.
- Forms of Forgetting, Aleida Assmann (lecture, herengracht 401, Amsterdam, 2014: <https://h401.org/2014/10/forms-of-forgetting/>)

4. Teaching methodology

Lectures, discussions and presentations are crucial. Classes will involve regular case studies, in which students will participate in structured discussions and debates about the ethics of a particular situation or decision faced by a journalist. This will involve close readings of various journalism guidelines as well as role-play. In addition, the students will participate by solving ethical dilemmas in reporting in conflict zones and other sensitive situations.

Students will be divided in groups and asked to make a presentation on the topic addressed. They will be given examples from the media or have freedom to choose their own topic.

For the midterm, students will write an essay (2000 words maximum) and will be given reporting dilemmas.

The final submission will address the key issues that were discussed during the course, including case studies.

5. Course Schedule

Date	Class Agenda
Day 1 4.2	Topic: An introduction to the course, including the aim, structure, and participation expected from students

	<p>Description: Overall presentation of the course. Then workshop: “The devil is in the details”. Truths, half-truths and downright lies. Recognizing how the media works.</p> <p>Assignments (next class): Study the guidelines of the BBC, Czech Radio and the US Society of Professional Journalists.</p> <p>Optional supplemental reading: Reuters Standards and Values, Radio Television Digital News Association, Code of Ethics.</p>
<p>Day 2 11.2</p>	<p>Topic: Seeking the Truth</p> <p>Description: What does seeking the truth mean in journalistic terms? Using “Potter’s Box” to help you make ethical decisions.</p> <p>Reading: “Potter’s Box” – in Media Now, pps. 508-512</p> <p>Assignments: Putting Potter’s Box into practice. Dilemma no. 1</p>
<p>Day 3 18.2</p>	<p>Topic: Editorial Guidelines</p> <p>Description: Using editorial guidelines as a help. What the guidelines say: BBC, Czech Radio, US Society of Professional Journalists</p> <p>Reading: BBC, Czech Radio and SPJ guidelines</p> <p>Assignments: Dilemma no. 2</p>
<p>Day 4 25.2</p>	<p>Topic: Truth at any cost? Discussion of the Czech film “Svatá” (Holy).</p> <p>Description: Discussion of the Czech feature film Svatá, which has a journalist’s dilemma as one of its central themes. Screening of the film</p> <p>Reading: Should We Believe Wikipedia? by Amy S. Bruckman, pps. 64-90.</p> <p>Assignments: (for the next class) Write a short essay on the media ethics issues that the film Svatá addresses (or fails to address)</p>
<p>Day 5 4.3</p>	<p>Topic: Should we believe Wikipedia?</p> <p>Description: the debates around Wikipedia and what they imply for the journalist</p> <p>Reading: Opening chapters of Battle for the Airwaves</p> <p>Assignments: Listen to BBC Archive Hour, A Quarrel in a Faraway Country.</p>
<p>Day 6 11.3</p>	<p>Topic: Case Study: Propaganda and WW2: Part 1</p> <p>Description: Defining propaganda</p> <p>Assignments: Dilemma no. 3</p>
<p>Day 7 18.3</p>	<p>Topic: Case Study: Propaganda and WW2: Part 1</p> <p>Description: The role of the media in the run-up to WW2. The “Munich Crisis”. Role play: What would the different players do if they had today’s technologies at their disposal?</p> <p>Assignment: Goebbels and Hannah Arendt homework</p> <p>Reading: Joseph Goebbels, “Radio as the Eighth Great Power”, Hannah Arendt, “The Origins of Totalitarianism”, Chapter 11.</p>
<p>Day 8 25.3</p>	<p>Topic: Propaganda and WW2: Part 2</p>

	<p>Description: How to resist propaganda? Role play: What would the different players do if they had today’s technologies at their disposal?</p> <p>Assignments: Write up your findings</p> <p>Reading: Listen to BBC interview with Prof. Geoffrey Hinton, the “father of AI”</p>
<p>Day 9 8.4 (After midterm break)</p>	<p>Topic: AI and Media Ethics</p> <p>Description: Discussion around a series of quotes on AI (Elon Musk, Geoffrey Hinton, AAU guidelines). Composing our own guidelines for using AI.</p> <p>Assignment: write up your AI guidelines</p>
<p>Day 10 15.4</p>	<p>Topic: The language of journalism.</p> <p>Description: Choosing the right word. Hidden meanings. The gap between what you are saying and what you think you are saying. Knowing your audience.</p> <p>Assignments: Analyze a newspaper article in detail. How is it structured? What adjectives used and in what context? What is left out? What assumptions are made?</p>
<p>Day 11 22.4</p>	<p>Topic: Journalism and crime</p> <p>Description: Case study: writing about the Holocaust. What needs to be told. The value of witness accounts, the value of evidence.</p> <p>Reading: Forms of Forgetting, Aleida Assmann (lecture, herengracht 401, 2014)</p> <p>Assignments: Quiz in class</p> <p>Assignments: (for the next class) Media Ethics dilemma No. 4</p>
<p>Day 12 29.4</p>	<p>Topic: Anatomy of a Fall: Case Study.</p> <p>Description: Show students the 2024 film, which looks at “truth” as seen from the personal and the legal perspective. We add the journalist’s point of view.</p> <p>Assignments: Look at the film through the lens of editor’s guidelines.</p> <p>Assignments: (for the next class) Media Ethics dilemma No. 5</p>
<p>Day 13 6.5</p>	<p>Topic: Final Assignment: Submission deadline for peer feedback.</p> <p>Description: Peer feedback on final assignment.</p> <p>Assignments: (for the next class) Fine tune final assignment</p>
<p>Day 14 13.5</p>	<p>Topic: Class review</p> <p>Description: Back to basics; Reviewing the course; Going through each key element.</p> <p>Assignments: Submit final assignment.</p>
<p>Day 15 20.5</p>	<p>Topic: Individual consultations</p>

6. Course Requirements and Assessment (with estimated workloads)

Assignment	Workload (hours)	Weight in Final Grade	Evaluated Course Specific Learning Outcomes	Evaluated Institutional Learning Outcomes*
Attendance	15	10%		
Class participation	15	15%	Ability to discuss outlined tricky situations in following	1,2

			media ethics guideline in a way that displays understanding of the key issues	
Assignment 1: writing up case studies	30	20%	Display knowledge of media ethics principles in solving media ethics dilemma, identify ethical issues in relations between advertising, communication and journalism	1,2,3
Midterm assignment: Presentations	40	20%	Demonstrating the capacity of critical thinking to analyze difference between truth, facts and opinion	1,2,3
Final assignment: Compiling editorial guidelines	50	35%	Displaying knowledge of how the media influences our perceptions, dealing with fake news, use critical thinking in evaluating output, including the social media. Making informed decisions as a journalist.	1,2,3
TOTAL	150	100%		

*1 = Critical Thinking; 2 = Effective Communication; 3 = Effective and Responsible Action

7. Detailed description of the assignments

Assignment 1: The issues behind media ethics dilemmas - Students will be given various media ethics dilemmas and evaluate options the media outlet has in solving them. What solution is the best, what consequences are if the selected solution has not been implemented? Students will use various journalist guidelines (BBC, Czech Radio, SPJ) to guide their analyses.

Assessment breakdown

Assessed area	Percentage
Mastery of topic presentation	40%
Mastery of understanding topic	40%
Quizzes	20%

Assignment 2: Past and Present:

Past: A historical case study and its relevance today - Students will familiarize themselves with a case from the twentieth century (the 1938 propaganda battles between Nazi Germany and Czechoslovakia) and will look at similarities and differences in our own time. What lessons are there to be learned?

Present: Guidelines for the AI era.

Assessment breakdown

Assessed area	Percentage
Understanding consequences of not following media ethics	40%
Mastery of making comparison, going deep with the analyses, understanding consequences	40%
Understanding logic of managing attention	20%

Assignment 3: An essay summarizing the issues brought up in the course – Drawing from examples covered during the course, students will summarize the media ethics issues discussed during the term and will look to the future. The outcome should be a document that will help them when they face future ethical dilemmas as journalists.

Assessment breakdown

Assessed area	Percentage
Understanding consequences for media ethics if societies do not set up rules in using technology	40%
Mastery of making comparison, underline the need to have technology as a tool	40%
Projecting the future of media ethics in the digital world	20%

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8. General Requirements and School Policies**General requirements**

All coursework is governed by AAU's academic rules. Students are expected to be familiar with the academic rules in the Academic Codex and Student Handbook and to maintain the highest standards of honesty and academic integrity in their work.

Electronic communication and submission

The university and instructors shall only use students' university email address for communication, with additional communication via NEO LMS or Microsoft Teams. Students sending e-mail to an instructor shall clearly state the course code and the topic in the subject heading, for example, "COM101-1 Mid-term Exam. Question". All electronic submissions are through NEO LMS. No substantial pieces of writing (especially take-home exams and essays) can be submitted outside of NEO LMS.

Attendance

Attendance, i.e., presence in class in real-time, is expected and encouraged. However, the requirement that students miss not more than 35% of real-time classes is temporarily suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Absence excuse and make-up options

Should a student be absent from classes for relevant reasons (illness, serious family matters), and the student wishes to request that the absence be excused, the student should submit an Absence Excuse Request Form supplemented with documents providing reasons for the absence to the Dean of Students within one week of the absence. If possible, it is recommended the instructor be informed of the absence in advance. Should a student be absent during the add/drop period due to a change in registration this will be an

excused absence if s/he submits an Absence Excuse Request Form along with the finalized add/drop form.

Students whose absence has been excused by the Dean of Students are entitled to make up assignments and exams provided their nature allows. Assignments missed due to unexcused absences which cannot be made up, may result in a decreased or failing grade as specified in the syllabus.

Students are responsible for contacting their instructor within one week of the date the absence was excused to arrange for make-up options.

Late work: No late submissions will be accepted – please follow the deadlines.

Electronic devices

Electronic devices (e.g. phones, tablets, laptops) may be used only for class-related activities (taking notes, looking up related information, etc.). Any other use will result in the student being marked absent and/or being expelled from the class. No electronic devices may be used during tests or exams unless required by the exam format and the instructor.

Eating is not allowed during classes.

Cheating and disruptive behavior

If a student engages in disruptive conduct unsuitable for a classroom environment, the instructor may require the student to withdraw from the room for the duration of the class and shall report the behavior to the student's Dean.

Students engaging in behavior which is suggestive of cheating will, at a minimum, be warned. In the case of continued misconduct, the student will fail the exam or assignment and be expelled from the exam or class.

Plagiarism and Academic Tutoring Center

Plagiarism is "the unauthorized use or close imitation of the language and thoughts of another author and the representation of them as one's own original work." (Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 2nd Edition, Random House, New York, 1993)

Turnitin's White Paper 'The Plagiarism Spectrum' (available at <http://go.turnitin.com/paper/plagiarism-spectrum>) identifies 10 types of plagiarism ordered from most to least severe:

1. CLONE: An act of submitting another's work, word-for-word, as one's own.
2. CTRL-C: A written piece that contains significant portions of text from a single source without alterations.
3. FIND-REPLACE: The act of changing key words and phrases but retaining the essential content of the source in a paper.
4. REMIX: An act of paraphrasing from other sources and making the content fit together seamlessly.
5. RECYCLE: The act of borrowing generously from one's own previous work without citation; To self-plagiarize.
6. HYBRID: The act of combining perfectly cited sources with copied passages—without citation—in one paper.
7. MASHUP: A paper that represents a mix of copied material from several different sources without proper citation.
8. 404 ERROR: A written piece that includes citations to non-existent or inaccurate information about sources
9. AGGREGATOR: The "Aggregator" includes proper citation, but the paper contains almost no original work.
10. RE-TWEET: This paper includes proper citation, but relies too closely on the text's original wording and/or structure.

At minimum, plagiarism from types 1 through 8 will result in a failing grade for the assignment and shall be reported to the student's Dean. The Dean may initiate a disciplinary procedure pursuant to the Academic Codex. Allegations of bought papers and intentional or consistent plagiarism always entail disciplinary hearing and may result in expulsion from AAU.

If unsure about technical aspects of writing, and to improve their academic writing, students are encouraged to consult with the tutors of the AAU Academic Tutoring Center. For more information and/or to book a tutor, please contact the ATC at: <http://atc.simplybook.me/sheduler/manage/event/1/>.

Course accessibility and inclusion

Students with disabilities should contact the Dean of Students to discuss reasonable accommodations. Academic accommodations are not retroactive.

Students who will be absent from course activities due to religious holidays may seek reasonable accommodations by contacting the Dean of Students in writing within the first two weeks of the term. All requests must include specific dates for which the student requests accommodations.

9. Grading Scale

Letter Grade	Percentage*	Description
A	95-100	Excellent performance. The student has shown originality and displayed an exceptional grasp of the material and a deep analytical understanding of the subject.
A-	90-94	
B+	87-89	Good performance. The student has mastered the material, understands the subject well and has shown some originality of thought and/or considerable effort.
B	83-86	
B-	80-82	
C+	77-79	Fair performance. The student has acquired an acceptable understanding of the material and essential subject matter of the course, but has not succeeded in translating this understanding into consistently creative or original work.
C	73-76	
C-	70-72	
D+	65-69	Poor. The student has shown some understanding of the material and subject matter covered during the course. The student's work, however, has not shown enough effort or understanding to allow for a passing grade in School Required Courses. It does qualify as a passing mark for the General College Courses and Electives.
D	60-64	
F	0-59	Fail. The student has not succeeded in mastering the subject matter covered in the course.

* Decimals should be rounded to the nearest whole number.

Prepared by: David Vaughan

Date: 30.10.2025

Approved by: Seth Rogoff

Date: