Ethical Decision-Making Models for Scholastic Media Publications

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Ethical Decision-Making Models for Scholastic Media Publications

Summary/Rationale:

“That does not mean, however, that there is no logical and sequential process for ethical decision-making. True, we may not be aware that a pattern exists, but that does not mean that there is no pattern…Developing real skill at ethics requires that intelligence fuse with intuition, that the process be internalized, and that decisions be made quickly, and naturally” (Kidder, p. 180).

Ethical fitness should be the goal of all journalists, but it is not merely an acquired skill. It takes conscience practice and discussion. It takes specific training in ethical decision-making so that journalists can “internalize” the decision-making process and so that sound ethical decisions can be made swiftly, under the pressure of deadlines.

This training can, and indeed should, begin at the high school level. Every student media staff is eventually faced with the question – should we publish it?

Most often, the answer to this question is not a clear yes or no (or a right vs. wrong answer), but rather journalists are most often faced with what author Rushworth Kidder calls, “right vs. right” decisions. This concept speaks to the complexity of decision-making in the media. So, with the complexities of the decisions that need to be made, how do high school journalists decide what to publish?

This packet is meant to help advisers of student media teach students how to make ethical decisions under pressure. It presents four different ethical decision-making models (adapted from the media textbooks listed below) students can apply when making their next difficult ethical decision. The packet also gives advisers four ethical scenarios to use with students to practice their ethical decision-making skills and four sample resolutions for those scenarios. All of this is meant to help guide advisers and students through the process of making ethical decisions that are “right” for them as a staff.

*Ethical Decision-Making Models adapted from How Good People Make Tough Choices by Rushworth Kidder and from Media Ethics by Philip Patterson & Lee Wilkins...


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*For more journalism related ethical scenarios visit...

http://journalism.indiana.edu/resources/ethics

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ETHICS WORKSHEET #1 – Three Principles

Applying the “Three Principles for Resolving Dilemmas”

*Adapted from *How Good People Make Tough Choices* by Rushworth Kidder (p. 152-158)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ends – Based Thinking</th>
<th>“Do what’s best for the greatest number of people.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rule – Based Thinking</td>
<td>“Follow your higher sense of principle.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care – Based Thinking</td>
<td>“Do what you want others to do to you.”</td>
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*Examine the ethical dilemma using each of the three principles defined above. Discuss each question for each principle and the possible strengths and weaknesses below.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Principle:</th>
<th>Questions to consider:</th>
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<th>Possible strengths &amp; weaknesses of this decision:</th>
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<td>• What will eventually happen if this decision is made?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• What are the possible outcomes?</td>
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<td>• With that in mind, what decision benefits the greatest number of people?</td>
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<td>Rule – Based</td>
<td>• What is the universally “right” decision? (universal law)</td>
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<td>• What standards should be followed regarding this decision?</td>
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<td>Care – Based</td>
<td>• Imagine yourself in their shoes... What would we want done to us in this situation? (examine all stakeholders)</td>
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ETHICS WORKSHEET #1 – Three Principles

After discussing the three principles in the chart, make the decision and support that decision below.

THE VERDICT...

Our final decision is...

We made this decision using the following ethical principle(s)...

Why we believe this decision is the best one...
Using the Potter Box to Make Ethical Decisions

*Adapted from Media Ethics by Philip Patterson & Lee Wilkins – 6th edition, 2008

“The Potter Box has four steps that should be taken in order...You process through the four steps in a counterclockwise fashion, beginning with the factual situation” (p. 100-101).

Understanding the Facts – Discuss all the facts of the case with those involved in making the decision.

Outlining Values – What is valued by those making the decisions? How does this impact the ethical decision? When an idea or principle is valued, it means one is willing to give up something for it.

Application of Philosophical Principles – Once it is decided what is valued, philosophical principles should be applied.

(examine Aristotle’s Golden Mean, Kant’s Categorical Imperative and Utilitarianism)

Articulation of Loyalties – “Potter viewed loyalty as a social commitment” (Media Ethics 101). In this final step, loyalties should be examined to see if any of them conflict.
**ETHICS WORKSHEET #2 – The Potter Box**

*Examine the ethical dilemma using all four parts of the Potter Box chart below. After analyzing the dilemma thoroughly, make a final ethical decision.*

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<tr>
<th>What are the facts?</th>
<th>Are there any conflicting loyalties?</th>
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<td>What are your values? Do they impact the ethical decision?</td>
<td>Apply the 3 principles discussed. What is the decision based on each principle?</td>
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**THE VERDICT...**

Our final decision is...

We made this decision using the following ethical principle(s)...

Why we believe this decision is the best one...
**ETHICS WORKSHEET #3 – Bok’s Model**

**Using Bok’s Model to Make Ethical Decisions**

*Adapted from *Media Ethics* by Philip Patterson & Lee Wilkins – 6th edition, 2008*

“Bok’s model is based on two premises: that we must have empathy for the people involved in ethical decisions and that maintaining social trust is a fundamental goal” (p. 4-5).

Bok says an ethical decision should be analyzed in three steps...

1.) **Consult your own conscience** – “about the ‘rightness’ of an action” (p. 5).
   
   *How do you feel about the action?*

2.) **Seek expert advice** – for “alternatives to the act creating the ethical problem” (p. 5).

   *Is there another way to achieve the same goal that will not raise ethical issues?*

3.) **Conduct a public discussion** – “with the parties involved in the dispute. If they cannot be gathered, conduct the discussion hypothetically” (p. 5).

   *How will others respond to the proposed act?*

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ETHICS WORKSHEET #3 – Bok’s Model

After discussing the chart, make the decision and support that decision below.

THE VERDICT...

Our final decision is...

We made this decision using the following ethical principle(s)...

Why we believe this decision is the best one...
ETHICS WORKSHEET #4 – Nine Checkpoints

Using the Nine Checkpoints for Ethical Decision-Making

*Adapted from How Good People Make Tough Choices by Rushworth Kidder (p. 178-186)

In his Nine Checkpoints for Ethical Decision-Making, Kidder explains the “logical and sequential process” for dealing with the ethical issues that often arise in everyday life. What’s helpful about his steps is the fact that they incorporate multiple ethical theories into a useable list for everyday ethical decision making (p. 178-186).

Kidder’s Nine Checkpoints for Ethical Decision-Making (from pages 178-186)

1.) **Recognize that there is a moral issue** – What is the true ethical dilemma?

2.) **Determine the actor** – Whose moral or ethical issue is it?

3.) **Gather the relevant facts** – What are the important facts for the ethical dilemma?

4.) **Test for right versus wrong issues** – Is there a clearly right or wrong answer?

5.) **Test for right versus right paradigms** – “What sort of dilemma is this?” (p. 183) 
   (truth vs. loyalty, self vs. community, short-term vs. long-term or justice vs. mercy)

6.) **Apply the resolution principles** – What are some of the possible resolutions to the dilemma? 
   (Use Aristotle’s Golden Mean, Kant's Categorical Imperative and Utilitarianism to reason)

7.) **Investigate the “trilemma” options** – “Is there a third way through this dilemma?” (p. 184)
ETHICS WORKSHEET #4 – Nine Checkpoints

8.) Make the decision – After applying checkpoints #1-7, what is the best possible resolution?

9.) Revisit and reflect on the decision – After the decision was made and the consequences have occurred, ask was this the best decision?

After discussing the checklist, make the decision and support that decision below.

THE VERDICT...

Our final decision is...

We made this decision using the following ethical principle(s)...

Why we believe this decision is the best one...
PRACTICE ETHICAL SCENARIOS

*Use the ethical scenarios below to practice ethical decision-making.

**Ethical Scenario #1**

A recent rumor going around the school accuses John Smith, the student council president, of a wild night of partying after the recent homecoming dance. The student is also the vice president of the local SADD (Students Against Drunk Driving) chapter.

A newspaper reporter/staff member catches wind of the potential story and does some preliminary research. She finds numerous sources confirming John’s attendance at the party and is able to access pictures of him partying on Facebook. She also discovers he has recently been forced to resign as the SADD vice president and is supposed to discuss his position as student council president tomorrow with the administration.

It’s deadline night and your staff wants to run the story.

Does the story go to print tonight? Is it ok to use the pictures off of Facebook if it does run? What should be included in the story if it does run?

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**Ethical Scenario #2**

The newspaper staff wants to run a serious, well-researched piece on the growing issue of date rape at parties. One female student, a junior, hears of the newspaper’s upcoming story on date rape and comes forward as a source. She claims she was date raped last Halloween at a college party. Several of her friends confirm her story and she is interviewed as a potential source for the article.

Does the newspaper use her as a source? If so, is she an anonymous source or named source?
PRACTICE ETHICAL SCENARIOS

*Use the ethical scenarios below to practice ethical decision-making.

**Ethical Scenario #3**

A newspaper reporter/staff member catches wind of a potential story on the outbreak of bed bugs within the school and approaches the editor for his/her opinion. She hears of two different incidences where students were pulled out of class to remove bed bugs from them and their clothing. She wants to interview both of these students, as well as the principal and guidance counselors for the story.

Should this story be covered? Should the reporter interview those students as sources if it is covered? How should this story be approached if it is covered?

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**Ethical Scenario #4**

A student comes forth and gives a tip to the newspaper staff for a potential story. She asks to remain unidentified (and no one on staff recognizes her when she comes in to give the tip). She tells the editor that “someone she knows” has created a hit list of other students at the school. She claims sophomore Derrick Jones has created the list and that he plans to follow through with his plans “soon.”

The newspaper adviser notifies the administration of this “tip,” and tells them the student left the class unidentified. The administration says they will investigate the tip.

It’s deadline night and your staff wants to run the story.

Does the story go to print tonight? Is it ok to use the information from the anonymous source? What should be included in the story if it does run?
Applying the “Three Principles for Resolving Dilemmas”

*Adapted from *How Good People Make Tough Choices* by Rushworth Kidder (P. 152-158)

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<th>Possible strengths &amp; weaknesses of this decision:</th>
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</table>
| Ends - Based Thinking | • What will eventually happen if this decision is made?  
• What are the possible outcomes?  
• With that in mind, what decision benefits the greatest number of people? | - If the story runs John’s reputation could be ruined.  
- One possible outcome is that this story deters others from drinking.  
- Running the story benefits the greatest # of people. | - The strength is that it could deter drinking and it is very newsworthy. SADD will now need a new VP.  
- The weakness is whether it violates his privacy and because he’s a minor. |
| Rule - Based Thinking | • What is the universally “right” decision?  
(universal law)  
• What standards should be followed regarding this decision? | - The “right” decision might just be to cover his removal from office, but not go into detail about the party. Pictures could also be off limits because they violate his privacy even more. | - A strength in this decision is that it covers the newsworthy part of the story without extorting the subject of the story.  
- A weakness is no art to run with story. |
| Care - Based Thinking | • Imagine yourself in their shoes...  
What would we want done to us in this situation?  
(examine all stakeholders) | - No way would I want this story to run! Just because I make one bad decision doesn’t mean I should be publicly humiliated. | - The weakness of this decision is that the story would go un-covered and students would not benefit from knowing about partying consequences. |
After discussing the three principles in the chart, make the decision and support that decision below.

THE VERDICT...

Our final decision is...

To run the story – but not all of it. Something needs to be covered to inform students of the consequences of drinking and of the newsworthy event of a new SADD Vice President, but our goal is not to completely humiliate John. People will already be talking about this, so we plan on running the facts of his removal from office, but not of his partying. We plan on running a small story on his removal from SADD (with no pictures from Facebook). We also plan on doing an in-depth feature on the dangers of drinking in our next issue.

We made this decision using the following ethical principle(s)...

Our decision is based on ends-based and care-based thinking. We believe running the article will benefit the greatest number of people, but we also are trying to keep John in mind. We want to run the news, but not at the expense of completely humiliating John.

Why we believe this decision is the best one...

The story needs to be covered, somehow. Everyone will be talking about this story and to not cover it would be to ignore a very serious news event. We believe a small news story is the best option because it allows for people to get the real facts from credible sources (like the principal and the SADD adviser). We also believe the in-depth feature in our next issue will be in the best interest of our readers.
Using the Potter Box to Make Ethical Decisions

*Adapted from *Media Ethics* by Philip Patterson & Lee Wilkins – 6th edition, 2008

“The Potter Box has four steps that should be taken in order...You process through the four steps in a counterclockwise fashion, beginning with the factual situation” (p. 100-101).

**Understanding the Facts** – Discuss all the facts of the case with those involved in making the decision.

**Outlining Values** – What is valued by those making the decisions? How does this impact the ethical decision? When an idea or principle is valued, it means one is willing to give up something for it.

**Application of Philosophical Principles** – Once it is decided what is valued, philosophical principles should be applied. (examine Aristotle’s Golden Mean, Kant’s Categorical Imperative and Utilitarianism)

**Articulation of Loyalties** – “Potter viewed loyalty as a social commitment” (*Media Ethics* 101). In this final step, loyalties should be examined to see if any of them conflict.
*Examine the ethical dilemma using all four parts of the Potter Box chart below. After analyzing the dilemma thoroughly, make a final ethical decision.

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<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Date rape is a serious issue and students need to be aware of it</td>
<td>- YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- One student claims to have been date-raped and her friends back her up</td>
<td>- We have a loyalty to our readers, to the potential source and to the man who she claims raped her. The best interest of all those loyalties conflict. But our first loyalty is to our readers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are your values? Do they impact the ethical decision?</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- We value a girl's right to say no</td>
<td>- Based on the FACTS we don’t use her as a source. We just don’t have enough facts to be sure she is a reliable source.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- We value our source’s privacy on sensitive issues</td>
<td>- Based on our VALUES we don’t use her as a source to guard her privacy on a sensitive issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- YES...our values impact the ethical decision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**THE VERDICT...**

Our final decision is...

Not to use her as a source. It’s a sensitive issue that she might regret discussing later or after she sees it in print. However, we could possible use one of her friends as a source to discuss the impact of the date rape on her friend, without naming the friend and thus protecting her identity. Our goal for this article is to inform our readers of date rape, and we don’t really need her as a source to reach our goal.

We made this decision using the following ethical principle(s)...

Mainly our “Outlining Values.” We value the privacy of our sources when it comes to sensitive issues.

Why we believe this decision is the best one...

We believe this is best because we can still inform our readers without potentially damaging our source.
Using Bok’s Model to Make Ethical Decisions

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“Bok’s model is based on two premises: that we must have empathy for the people involved in ethical decisions and that maintaining social trust is a fundamental goal” (4-5).

Bok says an ethical decision should be analyzed in three steps...

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   *How do you feel about the action?*

2.) **Seek expert advice** – for “alternatives to the act creating the ethical problem” (p. 5).
   
   *Is there another way to achieve the same goal that will not raise ethical issues?*

3.) **Conduct a public discussion** – “with the parties involved in the dispute. If they cannot be gathered, conduct the discussion hypothetically” (p. 5).
   
   *How will others respond to the proposed act?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The ethical dilemma...</th>
<th>Students want to run a story on bed bugs and interview 2 students who had bed bugs on them at school.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consult your conscience</td>
<td>I feel it’s important to inform students of bed bugs in the school and of the best ways to avoid carrying them home. My gut tells me it would be wrong to embarrass the people who do have bed bugs, though. Some people still think only dirty people get bed bugs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek expert advice</td>
<td><em>(Here we should talk to our adviser and to other news room professionals)</em> We could run a story on bed bugs (what they are, etc.) and have the principal confirm we have them at the school, but we don’t need to interview the people who have them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct a public discussion</td>
<td>We can talk to other people and see what they think about the story. We can bring in a sample of students on their lunch into a staff meeting and see what they think about the coverage.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After discussing the chart, make the decision and support that decision below.

**THE VERDICT...**

Our final decision is...

To run the story on bed bugs...we believe it’s in the best interest of our students to know about bed bugs and how to prevent bringing them home with them. We also want to dispel any misconceptions about bed bugs.

We made this decision using the following ethical principle(s)...

We mainly focused on “consulting our conscience.” We didn't feel it was right to target students with bed bugs, but we did feel it was right to inform our readers of the problem.

Why we believe this decision is the best one...

This decision is the best one because it allows us to inform our readers while not embarrassing students/sources who have not done anything wrong.
Using the Nine Checkpoints for Ethical Decision-Making

*Adapted from How Good People Make Tough Choices by Rushworth Kidder (p. 178-186)

In his Nine Checkpoints for Ethical Decision-Making, Kidder explains the “logical and sequential process" for dealing with the ethical issues that often arise in everyday life. What’s helpful about his steps is the fact that they incorporate multiple ethical theories into a useable list for everyday ethical decision-making (p. 178-186).

Kidder’s Nine Checkpoints for Ethical Decision-Making (from pages 178-186)

1.) Recognize that there is a moral issue – What is the true ethical dilemma?
   The safety of students could be at stake...but how do we know she’s telling the truth? She won't identify herself (which is even more suspicious). Do we run the story?

2.) Determine the actor – Whose moral or ethical issue is it?
   It’s our ethical issue. We could choose to ignore her or to take her seriously.

3.) Gather the relevant facts – What are the important facts for the ethical dilemma?
   The facts – the potential gunman is Derrick Jones (but there is no evidence to this) and an unidentified student gave us the tip. If he does follow through with his plans, the source claims it will happen “soon.”

4.) Test for right versus wrong issues – Is there a clearly right or wrong answer?
   No. There is no right versus wrong answer. If we don’t run it and the shooting happens soon, we could have protected the best interest of the students. If we do run it and it’s rumor, we can spread panic in the building and potentially damage a student’s reputation (if we run the name). If it’s not true, we could also damage our credibility as a publication.

5.) Test for right versus right paradigms – “What sort of dilemma is this?” (p. 183)
   (truth vs. loyalty, self vs. community, short-term vs. long-term or justice vs. mercy)
   This could be considered a truth vs. loyalty and a self vs. community dilemma (depending on how you look at it).

6.) Apply the resolution principles – What are some of the possible resolutions to the dilemma?
   (Use Aristotle’s Golden Mean, Kant’s Categorical Imperative and Utilitarianism to reason)
   Possible resolutions include running the story but not running the name of the potential shooter. Another possible resolution is to not run the story at all.

7.) Investigate the “trilemma” options – “Is there a third way through this dilemma? (p. 184)
   The third way is to let the administrator deal with the threat first and to run the story when there is more solid evidence to back up the claim.
ETHICS WORKSHEET #4 – Nine Checkpoints

8.) **Make the decision** – After applying checkpoints #1-7, what is the best possible resolution?

We think the best decision is the third one... to wait until there is more facts and evidence to base the story on. We don't want to risk damaging the reputation of our publication if it is false and if it turns out to be true, the administration will close school or make the necessary adjustments to ensure the safety of the students.

9.) **Revisit and reflect on the decision** – After the decision was made and the consequences have occurred, ask was this the best decision?

*Not sure on this one....it's a practice scenario! It would be interesting to reflect on the consequences of our decision should this really happen (but we hope this doesn’t happen).*

---

**After discussing the checklist, make the decision and support that decision below.**

**THE VERDICT...**

Our final decision is...

To wait until there is more information before printing the story (see #8 above).

We made this decision using the following ethical principle(s)...

Well, we didn't apply Kant’s Categorical Imperative because that would have called for us to print the story, just in case it might be true. We utilized more of the Golden Mean... we found the middle ground between two extremes. We didn’t choose not to run the story at all; we just choose to wait until we had more substantial evidence.

Why we believe this decision is the best one...

Because we won’t incite panic and we won’t damage the credibility of our publication. Plus, we just don’t have any evidence that makes this truth.