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Ethics essay
Final draft
3/13/2013

In Kovach and Rosenstiel's "The Elements of Journalism," the ninth element -- "practitioners have an obligation to exercise their personal conscience" -- is extremely broad. It might be considered a cop-out to write a focused essay about such an expansive concept. But it is a perfect element to describe a bouquet of dilemmas I encountered as managing editor of The Maneater, Mizzou's semi-weekly student paper. Because there are so many reporters and editors at The Maneater, and each one is a student on top of their extensive duties in the newsroom, the staff operates under a general rule of doing the right thing because they know it's the right thing to do. Of course, this is not unique to the 'Eater. Every news organization operates this way to some extent: At The Virginian-Pilot, editors were not double checking my CQs or Googling the names of my sources -- they worked under the assumption that I had already done those things. Journalism is always going to be partially on the honor system. It is assumed that we are getting the news right, and odds are nobody is going to be checking up on us.

However, the difference between a lot of news sources and The Maneater is that The Maneater is run almost exclusively by people under the age of 20 who are still in school. There is no "adult" advisor for the editorial staff. Everything we do is on us, for better or for worse. This is a point of pride for us. We would often go to journalism conventions and be the only paper without an advisor. We felt cool and independent and grown-up knowing that we make our own decisions, and nobody tells us what to do. However, I learned as managing editor that some people will always need a babysitter.

The most blatant ethical dilemma I encountered was called to my attention one day late

in the semester by a freshman staff photographer. He told me that he had seen the photo editor photoshop a beard and horns onto a photo of a student he didn't like (the student was a face in the crowd at a sporting event) and run it with the alterations. At the time, nobody higher than the photo editor had to approve the images that ran in the paper online. It shocked me that a person I had built up a trusting relationship with had valued vengeance over the reputation of himself, the entire staff and the paper at large. It was that incident that showed me just how much faith we put into journalists, and how surprising it is when they purposefully do something unethical. The whole paper was trusting this editor to exercise his personal conscience when nobody was looking -- something I had taken for granted in the past. I ended up having to confront him about his indiscretion and ask him not to return the following semester. He wasn't surprised at all that I wanted to talk about the issue and he certainly wasn't surprised that what he had done was wrong. This experience taught me to be a less trusting editor, especially of the staffers who had gotten on my "good side."

The dilemma was exacerbated by the negative vibes that permeated the newsroom that semester. There was a lot of gossiping, in-fighting behind closed doors, side-choosing, anger, secret resentments. I tried my hardest to get people to tell me what was really going on, but the problems were so ingrained that I don't think people could even explain them. It's like the entire chemistry of the staff was off, and I felt completely helpless. Every personnel move I made felt political; someone would be angry with me no matter what I did. Because of that, I didn't feel like I could fire the people who were damaging the quality of the paper. I didn't want a full-fledged revolt to be launched against the editor-in-chief and I, so I was forced to play it safe when it came to letting people go. This was an ethical dilemma that I struggled with internally every day. The EIC and I had countless conversations about it: Is it worth it to let the editors who are sinking the ship go, knowing that the rest of the staff might leave with them?

(The Maneater is known for its cliqueness.) Ultimately, we decided to sweat it out with the staff we had, but I'm still not convinced we made the right choice. Sometimes I think starting from scratch is the only way to fix something that seems broken beyond repair. The staff we stuck with weighed heavily on my conscience then, and it still does. I worry that we didn't serve our readership as well as we could have because our staff was so disjointed. Something that taught me about ethics is that there's not always a clear right answer. Maybe we made the right choice, but maybe we didn't. I'll never be able to know for sure. A lot of ethics is doing the thing you think is most right in the moment.

My most recent ethical Maneater dilemma happened after I left the staff to work at the Missouriian. My best friend was running the paper, and his managing editor and the rest of the staff had put together the notorious April Fool's issue that caused outrage on campus and around the country. I did not feel like the situation was handled well by the outside world nor the university, and I still don't. The EIC and managing editor were made to be public punching bags for weeks; it's like everyone simultaneously lost their sense of compassion and decided to let these two have it. And, having been "on the inside," I know the entire staff is responsible for that issue, not just the ME and definitely not the EIC, who is not supposed to be in on the joke (as stupid as that sounds). It made me sad to see the lack of support for people who had made a mistake, even from within the 'Eater staff. My dilemma came when I was reminded that I was a member of the Student Publications Board, which was supposed to help choose a punishment for the EIC and ME. I debated what I should do. Should I recuse myself because I find it repugnant that a punishment is even being discussed? Or should I stay on the board and let my side be heard? (The fact that I was close with the EIC and ME didn't seem to be an issue -- everyone else on the board also knew them.) I made the decision to step down. I felt it was important to stay true to myself and what I believe in, and I didn't

want to be a part of that process. It taught me that being a human is part of being a journalist. I can't parse myself into bits and choose what I want to be in that moment. I am always my full self, and sometimes making a personal choice is the right thing to do in a situation.