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Commentary

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One of the unexpected pleasures of editing this journal is the ability to work with people I admire. I was fortunate to know Dr. Wendy Wyatt years ago while she worked on her master's degree in Missoula, Montana. Back then I remember being particularly impressed with her quick mind, scholarly writings, and generous spirit. I am pleased to report that my initial sense of her potential impact on the field of mass media ethics has been exceeded by reading one of her latest pieces published in this issue, "Blame Narratives and the News: An Ethical Analysis."

For those of us who teach ethics, Wendy's implied call for us to consider the notion of how blame is employed by the news media and others should be an important addition to our teaching. For myself, I use a ten-step "Systematic Ethical Analysis (SEA)" that my students use to analyze case studies: (1) identify the most important facts, (2) list any additional questions that should be asked, (3) describe the dilemma, (4) identify the moral agents (MAs) and stakeholders (SHs) with their role-related responsibilities, (5) for each MA and SH, name their assumed values and the two most opposite, (6) for each MA and SH, name their assumed loyalties and the two most opposite, (7) define and describe ethical philosophies that justify or condemn actions, (8) name two creative and two credible alternatives, (9) admit what you would do given the facts of the situation, and (10) identify your sources (for a more detailed SEA, email me). For a scenario in which blame is a major component, students should be made aware of its long-term effects on society and encouraged to include a discussion on the concept in their writings.

The reason for adding blame to the awareness of future communicators is made evident in Wendy's conclusion that is both practical and optimistic:

Journalism can help us make the all-important move away from a culture where blame dominates toward one where blame is merely one tool among many at a journalist's disposal. As such, blame can help ensure that morality's demands are met. Blame, when assessed fairly and reported truthfully, can help make strong relations more probable, future harmony more likely, and hopes for a better society more promising.

In 1967 The Troggs sang "Love is all around me," but we all know that there is plenty of blame as well. I assign blame (and not love) to loud neighbors across the street, a too talkative clerk at the post office, a grumpy traveler in a hotel's elevator, a chef who doesn't cook mussels long enough, a dog without proper training, as well as intransigent protesters, school board members, religious followers, congressional representatives, and media commentators/personalities. In her conclusion for my class of how the media covered the Rodney King beating videotaped by George Holliday and

showed throughout the world in 1991, a student of mine concluded, “These officers were crucified by the media. The media made them look like absolute monsters. These men were defending themselves against a man who was attacking them and not obeying orders.” Blame was assigned to the media and to King, but not to the officers who were eventually found guilty of their crimes. Despite my best intentions, my teaching failed her.

To hold others responsible for any behavior gone wrong is a common human trait, just as is to avoid any notion of blame aimed inward. Wyatt’s monograph will not only help you understand blame as used in the media, but also prod you to confront your own blameworthy actions. In that spirit of lessons learned, due to a title of a picture that was in error on the AEJMC website, the commentary in the previous issue was misleading. At the 1912 founders meeting there were eighteen educators and five professionals—all men. Nevertheless, before publication the facts should have been checked with the organization’s staff for accuracy. I regret the error and blame myself—a little.

Paul Martin Lester,
Editor-in-Chief