# Integrating practical wisdom into media ethics curricula for journalism majors

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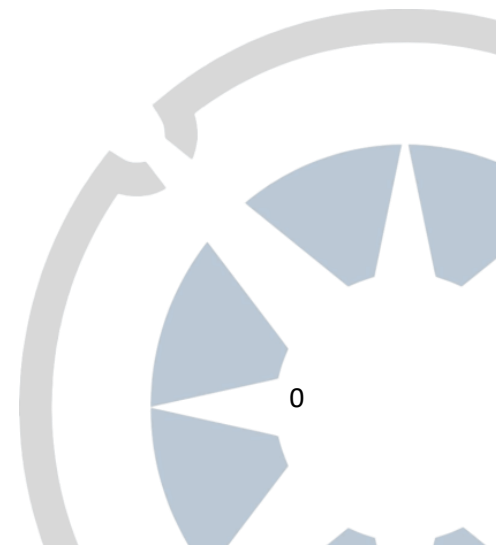
**Integrating practical wisdom into media ethics curricula for journalism majors**

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Journalists have the power to draw our attention toward or away from certain aspects of an issue or situation. By shaping how we perceive a situation, their authorial choices can also influence how we interpret and respond to that situation. Media psychologists have termed this phenomenon *framing,* and a robust literature has explored the effects of framing on audience members' long-term patterns of perception, interpretation, and response. For example, when covering the conflict between a homeless man and the families who live in the neighborhood where he has camped, one journalist might emphasize the homeless man's perspective while another journalist emphasizes the families' perspectives. The difference in emphasis corresponds to a difference in audiences' understanding of the situation, their feelings about the situation, and the courses of action that they are likely to approve.

These three components—understanding of a situation, feelings, and approved courses of action—are the constituent parts of another construct: *practical wisdom* (or *phronesis*). Phronesis describes an "ideal" type of perception, interpretation, and response in which we recognize all the morally relevant features of the situation and integrate them into a well-balanced, fair, and morally sensitive course of action (Snow et al., 2021; Darnell et al., 2019). For example, a *phronimos* (person with high levels of phronesis) would notice the plight of both the families and the homeless man, and would take both perspectives into account (along with any other relevant factors) when deciding how to proceed. Insofar as both framing and phronesis involve perception, interpretation, and response, the psychological variables that comprise

phronesis seems to fall under the umbrella of the psychological variables that journalists' framing can influence.

I propose that journalists' authorial choices have the potential to positively affect the development of audience members' phronesis, and that framing theory can help us conceptualize the psychological processes underlying this effect. Specifically, the goal of this paper is twofold: to propose a psychological model of one route by which journalists' authorial emphasis and deemphasis may affect the phronesis of audience members; and to suggest a tool for integrating phronesis into the media ethics component of journalism education.

The first section outlines Snow and colleagues' (2021) psychological model of phronesis and describes framing theory. The second introduces the proposed model of framing effects on phronesis. Working from this model, the third section suggests a tentative pair of strategies for integrating an awareness of phronesis into the media ethics component of journalism curricula.

**Conceptual background**

Phronesis

Many conceptualizations of phronesis are in circulation. While reviewing the leading models, Miller (2021a) identified two underlying positions.[1] In the *Socratic model,* phronesis is not psychologically distinct from the other moral virtues. Rather, all virtues are reducible to phronesis manifesting itself in different moral domains (e.g., De Caro, Vaccarezza, & Niccoli, 2018; see also Sherman, 1991; Dancy, 2018). For example, both overcoming the urge to run during battle (an example of courage) and refusing to cheat on a test (an example of honesty) would be considered realizations of phronesis rather than realizations of courage or honesty. In contrast, the *standard model* argues that phronesis is an intellectual virtue that is psychologically distinct from the moral virtues while still being necessary for them to count as virtues (e.g., Russell, 2009; Snow et al., 2021; Darnell et al., 2019). According to this model, understanding that the situation calls for 'resisting the urge to run' or 'refusing to cheat' requires phronesis, but the choices themselves are still instances of courage or honesty. Framing theory is likely compatible with both positions, and this possibility

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should be explored. To begin the conversation, however, Snow and colleagues' (2020) version of the standard model is taken as a starting point.

## Standard model of phronesis

The standard model of phronesis defines phronesis as a virtue that is independent of the other virtues while still being necessary for their operation. According to this camp, phronesis is the process by which we notice the morally relevant features of a situation and determine how best to pursue abstract moral goals in the context of that situation. Two categories of functions are ascribed to phronesis in this model: perceptual functions and functions related to means-ends reasoning.

### *Perception*

The perceptual functions of phronesis include the ability to notice the features of a situation that are morally relevant. "Noticing" involves not just rational recognition, but also feeling appropriate to the features in question. It is also important to note that perception does not necessitate conscious attention. Well-developed phronesis is often characterized by automaticity; the practically wise person has developed such sensitivity to morally relevant features that they simply "stand out" to her (Snow et al., 2021; Lapsley, 2021; Darnell et al., 2019).

Aristotle originally described three specific functions that Snow and colleagues (2021) take as the basis for translating phronesis into its psychological counterparts. The first is *comprehension,* the ability to "read" a situation, or to reflect correctly about a person's words or actions. The second, *sense,* refers to the discrimination of what is reasonable and appropriate. This function includes such skills as perspective taking, sympathy, and emotion regulation. Finally, *intelligence* refers to problem-solving abilities that are built up over time through experience. In short, each situation has value-laden moral claims, and phronesis describes the process of recognizing those claims (both cognitively and emotionally).

### *Ends and means reasoning*

The ends-means-reasoning functions of phronesis refer to three levels of understanding: understanding the relationship between higher-order moral goals and the context-specific goals at play in a given situation; understanding how the situation relates to those goals; and identifying the courses of action that are most likely to succeed at pursuing those goals. In Aristotle's terminology, this refers to *deliberative excellence* (grasping the correct end in one's deliberations and how to take the right steps toward them) and *cleverness* (good means–ends reasoning).  In other words, the practically wise person can identify specific moral goals in the context of the situation, identify context-specific threats and affordances of a given situation for those goal, and accurately predict the positive and negative consequences of the various possible responses that are available to us. In other words, the greater our phronesis, the more successful we will likely be at recognizing and pursuing relevant moral goals.

Another function that falls under the umbrella of means-end reasoning (and one that holds particular relevance for journalists) is the ability to weigh competing moral goals when a situation places those goals in conflict. A given situation often contains multiple threats and affordances for multiple goals, meaning that a variety of virtuous responses are all called for (e.g., the elderly gentleman needs help, but so does the person who is drowning in the lake). A key feature of phronesis is the ability to weigh the morally relevant claims at hand when deciding what to do.

## Whole trait theory

Snow and colleagues use the *whole trait theory* (WTT) of personality as the psychological framework for phronesis. Whole trait theory seeks to explain how social cognitive mechanisms (e.g., perspective taking) lead to the stable patterns of response that we commonly think of as traits (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015; 2021; see also Dweck, 2017). Traits, they argue, have two interrelated components: the explanatory, social cognitive side (termed $Trait_{EXP}$) and the descriptive, behavioral side (termed $Trait_{DES}$). Specifically, the term "trait" is stipulated as a stable pattern of enacting *states:* types of responses that exhibit the descriptive content of a trait, but though specific actions and in specific contexts (e.g., agreeable responses such as expressing warmth toward a new

coworker, or conscious responses such as regularly cleaning one's desk). States thus have the same content as traits, but are shorter in duration. It is states that we describe when we speak of "virtuous behavior" or "virtuous responses" to situations (e.g., the act of picking up fallen groceries; Miller, 2013).

Perception and means-ends reasoning are key components of TraitEXP. Goals are key to traits in WTT, because enacting states has consequences for our goals. Over time and through experience, we can learn to expect particular consequences from particular states. For example, past experience may lead an office worker to expect that smiling at a coworker (i.e., enacting state extroversion) will result in the coworker liking her more. Smiling, then, is expected to have a positive consequence for her goal of being liked (see also Read et al., 2010). However, if past experience leads the office worker to expect that acting warmly toward a coworker will lead to the coworker to see her as obsequious—a negative consequence for her goal of being liked—then she be less likely to enact state extroversion in pursuit of this goal. In this way, our perception of the situation and our means-ends reasoning (i.e., our predictions about the consequences of enacting certain states) interact to determine which states we regularly enact.

Past experience develops *links* between different goals, situational stimuli, and expected consequences of states, and the links can vary in strength (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2021, p. 100). For the office worker who regularly experiences positive consequences as an outcome of enacting state agreeableness, registering the stimuli of "a new person" will quickly activate the goal of being liked and the belief that enacting state agreeableness (e.g., by smiling) will have positive consequences for that goal. The more past experiences support this link, the quicker and more automatically the stimulus of "a new person" leads to enacting state agreeableness.

Because well-worn links lead to similar types of responses, and because the exact pattern and strength of links is unique to each person, each individual tends to develop characteristic clusters of responses in situations that are relevant to a given trait. These *density distributions of*

*states* are the patterns of behavior and emotion that allow outside observers to form expectations about how a person will act. In other words, the degree to which we regularly enact a state given the relevant stimuli determines the degree to which we have the associated trait. The more reliably the office worker enacts state extroversion in relevant situations, the more the office worker can be said to have trait extroversion.

The ends-and-means-reasoning component of phronesis take place in the interpretive and motivational systems. Intelligence (problem-solving abilities that are built up over time through experience), deliberative excellence (grasping the correct end in one's deliberations and how to take the right steps toward them) and cleverness (good means–ends reasoning) overlap with two components of the interpretive system: the crystallized structures of expectations (e.g., schemas, roles, etc.),  and the "fluid capacities" for analyzing and problem solving (including emotional intelligence,  theory of mind, perspective taking, etc.).

More importantly for framing theory, the perceptual functions of phronesis overlap with the perceptual and interpretive components of WTT. Comprehension (the ability to "read" a situation, or to reflect correctly about a person's words or actions) overlaps with the chronic salience of the trait (virtue)-relevant features of a situation. For example, to someone with a high level of trait compassion, the elderly gentleman's plight will automatically stand out and activate links to relevant behaviors. Past experience determines which virtue-relevant features (and, by extension, which virtues) are most chronically salient (p. 80). Moreover, the situational features that are relevant to multiple virtues can all be salient to a person at the same time, allowing for the "regulating between virtues" function. In the same way, sense (the discrimination of what is reasonable and appropriate and the associated emotional sensitivity) overlaps with chronic salience of the trait (virtue)-relevant features of a situation, specifically those that involve understanding the goals and feelings of other people.

The key point of connection with framing theory is that developing phronesis entails developing the ability to recognize all the different morally relevant factors of a situation. It is possible that journalists' authorial emphases and deemphases can help us develop this ability.

<u>Framing theory</u>

Journalists have a unique power to shape what is salient in an audience's perception of in a situation. In media psychology's literature on news media, *framing theory* describes the process by which emphasizing or deemphasizing certain features of a situation can shape the viewer's perception and interpretation of that situation (Borah, 2011). As Entman (1993), explained, "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more *salient* in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52, emphasis added). Frames are textual features (i.e., authorial choices) that encourage audiences to make associative connections between an issue and particular considerations relevant to its definition, causes, implications, and treatment. For example, one journalist might emphasize the homeless man (his history, personality, values, etc.) and his struggles. Another journalist might emphasize the history, personality, and struggles of the little local girl who fears the homeless man. Data suggest that each news story would lead audiences to perceive and interpret the presence of the homeless man in their community differently. In a 1997 study, Nelson and colleagues presented audiences with two versions of a news story about a Ku Klux Klan rally: one that presented events in light of considerations about free speech, and one that presented events in light of concerns about public order. They found that people exposed to the free speech frame exhibited substantially more tolerance toward the Klan's speeches and rallies.

In a WTT framework, frames can be thought of as suggested links between certain goals and certain situational threats or affordances. Links are schemas, developed through experience, that inform our expectations about how a situation will affect the things we care about. Similarly, "frames are the devices that build the associations between concepts" when an audience is exposed

to a new situation (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009, p. 19). For example, consider a news story that first features interviews with parent about their desire for their children's safety and then presents a statistic about the number of children who have been assaulted by homeless persons. These choices make the value of children's safety more salient to audiences, while also framing the homeless man as a threat to that value. Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley found just such results in their (1997) study of Klan rally framing: the frame forged a link between the issue at hand (the rally) and a particular valued goal (e.g., free speech).

Evidence suggests that if the audience is unfamiliar with the issue, then the link that the news story suggests will be a key determining factor in how that person thinks about the issue in the future (Tewksbury et al., 2000). Likewise, the more we see a certain issue presented in a certain frame, the more likely we are to take the suggested view of the situation (Lecheler et al., 2015). In WTT, accessibility of links determines how we will perceive, interpret, and respond to similar events in the future. In this way, WTT explains the psychological mechanisms by which framing can shape our characteristic ways of perceiving and interpreting situations.

**WTT and framing: A model of news media's effect on audience phronesis**

I propose that repeated exposure to certain patterns of emphasis and deemphasis in news media can foster similar patterns of perception in the audience. If the pattern of emphasis that a journalist crafts approximates a phronimos's perception of the situation, then the news message is likely to facilitate the audiences' development of phronesis. In brief, this model can be summarized in three claims:

1. There are three key categories of morally relevant features in news coverage: the wellbeing of competing *stakeholders*, the *implications* of the situation for each stakeholder, and each stakeholder's *understanding* of the implications of the situation for their own and others' wellbeing (via perspective taking);

2. The degree to which the media's pattern of emphasis (a) matches what a phronimos would see or (b) supplements a weakness in an individual audience member's perceptual patterns determines the degree to which the media facilitates the development of phronesis; and

3. Framing can affect patterns of perception on two levels of abstraction: a context-specific level (e.g., becoming more sensitive to the plight of homeless persons, specifically) and a context-independent level (e.g., the cross-situational tendency to notice different sides of a conflict).

### 1. Categories of morally relevant features

Insofar as journalism focuses on recounting current events or covering social and political issues, three key categories of morally relevant features may be particularly useful for journalists: the wellbeing of competing *stakeholders* (here defined as individuals for whom the situation has potential consequences), the *implications* of the situation for each stakeholder (i.e., the threats and affordances for each stakeholders' goals), and each stakeholder's *perception* of the implications of the situation for their own and others' wellbeing (which can differ from what the journalist believes to be the reality of the matter). For example, in the situation with the neighborhood and the homeless man, the stakeholders include both the residents and the homeless man. Identifying the stakeholders and their goals clarifies the threats and affordances at hand: the implications of the situation for the residents include uncertainty about physical safety (e.g., parents are afraid to let their children play on the street, residents feel the need to double-lock their doors, fears about theft are heightened, etc.); the implications of the situation for the homeless man may also include safety (e.g., he is less likely to be attacked by gangs in an upscale neighborhood), as well as greater access to food (e.g., the residents seem as though they have food to spare). Finally, the distinction between fact and perception is vital for understanding what each person does, why they do it, and what they are likely to do in the future. For example, the homeless man may have no intention whatsoever of harming any child.

Indeed, he may be taking active steps to protect the neighborhood. However, if a parent has had negative experiences with homeless individuals in the past (e.g., they themselves were assaulted by a homeless individual as a child), then their caution becomes understandable.

In short, in the context of news reporting, at least three factors that characterize phronetic perception are recognition of (1) stakeholders, (2) implications for stakeholders (or, in WTT terms, situational threats and affordances for stakeholders), and (3) stakeholders' own perceptions of those implications.

### 2. Routes of effect

In this model, there are two routes by which news framing can have positive effects on the development of phronesis. In the first, the journalist's framing emphasizes *all* of the relevant factors—thereby mirroring the phronimos's perception of the situation. For example, when a phronimos looks at the neighborhood conflict, they would notice both the perspective of the homeless man and the perspective of the parents. By including both stakeholders in a description of the issue (along with the implications of the situation for each, and their stakeholder's understanding of those implications), a journalist's article can (in some small way) facilitate the development phronesis: as the audience reads the article, their attention is drawn to the same elements that a phronimos notices, allowing them to "practice" phronetic perception.

In the second route, the journalist emphasizes the *types of factors that are insufficiently salient* to the individual audience member. For example, an activist might be so immersed in the story of the homeless person that the reactions of the parents seem unreasonable and boorish. This person does not have phronetic perception. Reading a news report that emphasizes the parents' perspective and explains the implications, however, can help to strengthen the weak links. The next time the activists enters the situation, she might be at least a little more likely to notice both sides of the story. In short, the degree to which the media's pattern of emphasis (a) matches what a phronimos would see, or (b) supplements a weakness in an individual audience

member's perceptual patterns, determines the degree to which the media facilitates the development of phronesis.[1]

### 3. Levels of abstraction

It should also be noted that effects on perception can occur on two levels of abstraction: a context-specific level (e.g., becoming more sensitive to the plight of homeless persons, specifically) and a context-independent level (e.g., the cross-situational tendency to notice different sides of a conflict). WTT distinguishes between perception that is *domain-specific* (i.e., connections that are bound to a particular context and set of stimuli, such as a homeless man) and perception that is *domain-general* (i.e., cross-situational perception where connections occur in higher-order categories). Phronesis involves both levels. A key function of phronesis is the "end-setting function" (Miller, 2021), wherein the phronimos recognizes individual instances as belonging to higher-order categories of values. For example, if "vulnerable people" are associated with the value of taking care of others, and "a homeless man" activates the higher-order category of "vulnerable people," then the homeless man will be associated with the value of taking care of others. Both domain-specific and domain-general schemas are needed for such judgements; a context-specific factor (e.g., the homeless man) cannot be connected with an abstract value (e.g., taking care of vulnerable others) unless there are intermediate links (e.g., homeless persons are vulnerable). Thus, when framing theory strengthens links on either level of abstraction, it develops the network of associations that enable the audience member to notice that type of stakeholder (e.g., homeless persons or children) next time individuals in that category are encountered.

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[1] It is important to note that this model does not claim that a journalist necessarily has access to a phronetic perspective on the situation. Sometimes, information about a perspective is simply not available (e.g., the homeless man is unwilling to talk with the reporter), or implications are discovered after the fact. Additionally, sometimes the journalist's own blind spots and phronetic imbalances will determine the framing. Rather, the claim is that a journalist's information is generally more complete than the audience's—if the audience already knew about the situation, they would not need to read the news to find out about it. Even though a journalist may not know everything, they have the ability to collect as well-rounded a picture as possible. They also have the ability to share or withhold parts of that picture. These abilities are sufficient to support the claim that sharing multiple sides of the story can help audiences develop sensitivity to multiple perspectives in similar situations.

In short, this model suggests that framing can improve audience phronesis by either helping audience members practice noticing all sides of the story, or by building the salience of stakeholders that the audience member would normally overlook. This model has practical implications for ethically mindful journalists.

**Phronesis practicums: A heuristic for identifying competing morally relevant features of situations**

On a practical level, by specifying (at least some of) the components that can become pattens of audience perception, this model can help journalists better predict the effects of their authorial choices on audience phronesis. It can also help journalists design for positive effects in their writing. However, in the practical, fast-paced environment of the newsroom, it is not immediately obvious how an abstract concept such as phronesis can be applicable. How can concerns about the practical wisdom of audience members inform the way that a journalist takes notes on a court case, or crafts a headline that will draw clicks? It is possible that awareness of the implications of authorial choices for audience phronesis will be higher if journalists are trained in a way that promotes attention to those implications. This raises an additional question: how can journalism curricula integrate an understanding and sensitivity to the phronesis of audience members into the training of journalists? A practical, intuitive, and efficient framework is needed for thinking about effects on audience phronesis in a newsroom setting.

I propose that the three components of phronetic perception in framing noted above—the wellbeing of competing stakeholders, the implications of the situation for each stakeholder, and each stakeholder's perception of the implications of the situation for their own and others' wellbeing—offer a starting point for developing such a framework. As previously argued, these factors hold particular relevance for journalists due to the news industry's focus on reporting current events and covering social or political issues. Thus, if journalists practice the art of "zeroing in on" these components of a situation, then attention to audience practical wisdom is more likely to take hold in actual news reporting. In other words, the three components can serve as a heuristic for facilitating audience practical wisdom in news reporting.

Two specific *phronesis practicums* are suggested as a prototype for using this heuristic. The first involves analyzing phronetic implications by comparing existing news articles to more objective information about a situation. In this practicum, students read a news article, and then either investigate the situation further to identify stakeholders, implications, and perspectives, or are given a casebook that contains unbiased information. Using the heuristic, students then identify the stakeholders, implications, and perspectives that the article's author emphasized, and those that the author deemphasized. These comparisons then serve as the basis for a class discussion about the likely effects of the news article on the audience's perception of both the domain-specific and domain-general issues. By engaging in this analysis and dwelling on its implications, this strategy can help students develop a habit of attending to phronesis-relevant situational factors and their implications for audiences.

The second practicum involves using the heuristic to analyze a situation or issue, and then developing that analysis into a news article that mirrors phronetic perception as closely as possible. Students first research a situation to identify the relevant stakeholders, implications, and perspectives. They then write an article that presents each of these components in a way that remains concise and engaging. Sustained attention to competing stakeholders would further foster the habit of noticing and integrating the phronesis-relevant situational factors. In short, the heuristic can be used in a variety of ways to integrate phronesis into a media ethics curriculum

## Conclusion

Journalists can shape the development of phronesis in audiences through the frames in their writing. However, no research to date has drawn this connection or explored the psychological mechanisms that underly it. The present research sought to do so, and to translate the resulting model into a prototype pedagogical tool for media ethics in journalism curricula.

This model and heuristic are intended as prototypes, and extensive development is needed. A few possible directions for development are as follows. First, on a conceptual level, future research could explore the exact mechanisms by which framing affects link development in a WTT framework. Second, while this model explores the role of journalists in designing messages that facilitate phronesis development, individual differences in audience members and viewing context (e.g., degree of trust in news, number of sources consulted, degree of familiarity with issues, etc.) are likely to shape the frame's effect. Thus, the potential mediating or moderating effects of these factors should be explored. Third, while this model focuses on phronesis development in audiences, the implications of practical wisdom training for the phronesis of journalists themselves should also be studied. Fourth, while this paper has focused on the positive effects of news framing on phronesis, the potential negative effects should be explored as well. Finally, professional journalists and journalism educators should be consulted about the best ways to enact the phronesis heuristic in journalism curricula and specific educational activities. Hopefully, future years will see more conversation about phronesis in journalism education.

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