

Module Overview: Creating Safe & Fair Newsrooms¹

News organizations must create safe and fair workplaces in which everyone can do their best work. Though it might seem counterintuitive, understanding why and how unethical behavior persists and creates unfair and unsafe workplaces is a prerequisite to understanding how to create safe and fair workplaces. The module uses sexual harassment as an example of a variety of factors that can make newsrooms unsafe and unfair, and as such, it sets the stage for a discussion of how to create newsrooms that are free of all types of unethical and illegal behavior and, as a result, are safe and fair for everyone.

The purposes of this module are multiple:

- To help students understand how the concepts of behavioral ethics — cognitive biases, social and organizational pressures and situational factors — enable bad behavior to continue in news organizations.
- To introduce “networks of complicity” to illustrate how they enable bad behavior to persist in newsrooms.
- To provide insights about how to encourage ethical behavior in news organizations so that they will be safe and fair workplaces.
- To familiarize students with sexual harassment law.

People often have wondered how accomplished journalists such as Charlie Rose, Matt Lauer and Mark Halperin, to name a few, could persist in sexually harassing others, especially when their behavior appeared to be an open secret in the newsrooms in which they worked. Perpetrators of unethical behavior such as sexual harassment skillfully build “networks of complicity” around themselves, and those networks are key in protecting perpetrators from sanction and enabling them to continue their unethical behavior. Behavioral ethics helps us understand how people in networks of complicity can deceive themselves and others about their unethical decision making and behavior. It draws on approaches from organizational studies, sociology, psychology, social psychology, economics and philosophy to illuminate moral decision-making or the lack thereof.² Behavioral ethics posits that most decisions are made instinctively, not rationally, and asserts that cognitive errors or rationalizations, social and organizational pressures, and situational factors often undermine ethical decision-making and prevent people from living as ethically as they intend.³ It is especially helpful in understanding why and how individuals, who do not intend to do anything wrong and think they are living ethical lives, get caught up in unethical decision-making and behavior.⁴

This module illustrates the concepts of behavioral ethics and networks of complicity through a variety of materials including an original case study, “#MeToo, Charles Rose and Newsroom Practices,” a video on applying behavioral ethics to sexual harassment, a video on networks of complicity, a video of a keynote address by CNN anchor Alisyn Camerota in which she provides accounts of her own experiences being sexually harassed as both as a young journalist and as a more experienced journalist, and a variety of supplementary materials.

MODULE CONTENT

Case and Teaching Note

- The case, “#MeToo, Charlie Rose and Newsroom Practices,” ties the module together. It prompts students to examine how a network of complicity and behavioral ethics factors (i.e., rationalizations, social and organizational pressures, situational factors) enabled Rose to continue his abhorrent behavior despite the fact that it was an open secret. If instructors prefer a longer reading assignment, they can assign The Washington Post articles upon which the case was based instead of the case: [“Eight women say Charlie Rose sexually harassed them — with nudity, groping and lewd calls”](#) by Irin Carmon and Amy Brittain from 2017 and/or [“Charlie Rose’s misconduct was widespread at CBS and three managers were warned, investigation finds”](#) by Brittain and Carmon from 2018.
- The Teaching Note for “#MeToo, Charlie Rose and Newsroom Practices” provides guidance for leading an in-class discussion of the case and related materials.

Behavioral Ethics

- A custom-produced video by Dr. Robert Prentice applies behavioral ethics concepts to sexual harassment:
“Understanding Sexual Harassment Through the Behavioral Ethics Lens”
- The article “Unethical Newsroom Behavior: Paradoxes and a Perfect Storm” by Minette E. Drumwright and Peggy H. Cunningham demonstrates how behavioral ethics provides a lens through which to understand unethical newsroom behavior.⁵
- An overview of behavioral ethics is provided on pages 431-437 of the article “Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making” by Minette E. Drumwright, Robert Prentice and Cara Biasucci.⁶
- A variety of short [Ethics Unwrapped](#) videos (typically three to four minutes each) and [glossary definitions](#) (approximately two minutes each) illustrate behavioral ethics concepts:
 - o “Moral Myopia” [video](#), glossary [definition](#)
 - o “Moral Muteness” [video](#), glossary [definition](#)
 - o “Tangible and Abstract Bias” [video](#), glossary [definition](#)
 - o “Loss Aversion” [video](#), glossary [definition](#)
 - o “Framing” [video](#), glossary [definition](#)
 - o “Overconfidence” [video](#), glossary [definition](#)
 - o “Obedience to Authority” [video](#), glossary [definition](#)
 - o “Conformity Bias” [video](#), glossary [definition](#)
 - o “Incrementalism” [video](#), glossary [definition](#)
 - o “Self-serving Bias” [video](#), glossary [definition](#)
 - o “Being Your Best Self, Part 1: [Moral Awareness](#)”
 - o “Being Your Best Self, Part 2: [Moral Decision Making](#)”
 - o “Being Your Best Self, Part 3: [Moral Intent](#)”
 - o “Being Your Best Self, Part 4: [Moral Action](#)”

Networks of Complicity

- A custom-produced video on “Networks of Complicity” with Dr. Minette E. Drumwright explains how a network of complicity develops, protects a perpetrator from sanction and enables unethical behavior to persist.⁷

Accounts of Journalists

- In a video of a keynote address, “#What Now: Pressing Forward in the Workplace,” CNN Anchor Alisyn Camerota recounts her experiences being sexually harassed by a producer when she was a young journalist and by Fox News CEO Roger Ailes when she was a more experienced journalist. She also provides advice for dealing with sexual harassment in news organizations.

Supplementary Materials

- Barbara Kellerman’s book “Bad Leadership: What It Is, How It Happens, Why It Matters” (Harvard Business School Press, 2004) characterizes “intemperate” leaders who lack self-control and their followers, who typically fail to rein them in, in Chapter 6, “Intemperate.”
- Cara Biasucci and Robert Prentice’s book “Behavioral Ethics in Practice: Why We Sometimes Make the Wrong Decisions” (Routledge, 2021) describes a number of behavioral ethics concepts in-depth and highlights accompanying Ethics Unwrapped videos.
- [Ethics Unwrapped](#) has a variety of videos, cases, and glossary definitions on behavioral ethics concepts beyond the ones identified above.
- The Hollywood Commission provides [a helpful resource](#) explaining sexual harassment law in easily accessible terms.

¹This module overview was written by Dr. Minette E. Drumwright for the purposes of facilitating teaching the module Creating Safe and Fair Newsrooms.

²M.L. Ambrose, M. Schminke and S.J. Reynolds, “Behavioral Ethics: New Frontiers,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 123, (2014): 77-78.

³Max H. Bazerman and Ann E. Tenbrunsel, “Blind Spots.” (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Robert Prentice, “Teaching Ethics: Biases and Heuristics,” *Journal of Business Ethics Education* 1, no. 1 (2004): 57-74; Robert Prentice, “Teaching Behavioral Ethics,” *Journal of Legal Students Education* 31, (2014): 325; L.K. Treviño, G.R., Weaver, and S.J. Reynolds, “Behavioral Ethics in Organizations: A Review,” *Journal of Management*, 32, no. 6 (2006): 951-990.

⁴Minette E. Drumwright, Robert Prentice, and Cara Biasucci, “Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making,” *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, 13, no. 3, (2015): 431-458.

⁵Minette E. Drumwright and Peggy H. Cunningham, “Unethical Newsroom Behavior: Paradoxes and a Perfect Storm,” *Journalism Practice* (2020): 1-21.

⁶Minette E. Drumwright, Robert Prentice and Cara Biasucci, “Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making,” *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, 13, no. 3, (2015): 431-458.

⁷This video is based on an article Minette E. Drumwright and Peggy H. Cunningham, “Unethical Newsroom Behavior: Paradoxes and a Perfect Storm,” *Journalism Practice* (2020): 1-21.