For Juniper and Magnolia, heirs to the mysterious future ahead, and the media wonders it has not yet revealed. Approach it responsibly and wisely.
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Audiences have arrived at a crucial moment in media history. There is now a multitude of media outlets and content types that make it nearly impossible to avoid contact with the media in the Western world. It is imperative that audiences claim responsibility as consumers of media because in doing so they force the media—the mass communicators—to uphold their ethical obligations as media producers. It is now understandable that there can be no passive audience if each member is to fulfill his and her obligation to society. With an increasingly diverse and sophisticated media market, audiences must be more vigilant than ever. The following collection of articles addresses some of the important issues and concerns of media ethics and audience studies. Ethics and audience studies demand further attention as the line between media producer and media consumer blurs. This collection is meant to accompany a discourse on media history, content, and theory, and within these areas the reader is asked to reflect on the place of ethics and audience.

Who is responsible for the mediated messages that are created, distributed, and consumed? Concerning the media and how it influences and affects society, the finger is often pointed away from the individual and at the organization, the body or outlet that creates media content. However, audiences have obligations in the cycle of media creation, distribution, and consumption. In order to visualize this complex relationship, I suggest a Media Cycle Model (MCM). Let’s place the audience—the consumer—as our entry point into the MCM (see Figure 1). Audiences are studied, focused, and packaged. Consider the individual audience member: What are her likes, dislikes, what is her daily routine, who is she, and what does she want, or better, need? From this information media organizations glean how she can be commoditized and how they can apply the data to profit in the creation of media. The cycle then spins to the organization that creates the message, which is then delivered to the consumer, and her feedback is sent back again to the organizational medium for further study of the effectiveness of the message, and the cycle continues. Society is a crucial element in the creation of media and, as such, it is imperative that audiences take responsibility as consumers, for these messages are being beamed at us and made for us. They seek to entertain, inform, persuade, and influence.
This collection of essays is meant to challenge the audience to consider itself as an active member of the media cycle and with that there are obligations to the content, the organization, and society. More specifically, it asks the media studies student to take responsibility for his position in the MCM. Audience members must consider their own participation in the mass communication model. As an audience member, one is part of a mass, but it is a mass of individuals, each with his or her own unique narrative, each containing common as well as individual responsibilities to the mediated message he or she engages. Also, as part of the audience mass, the responsibility extends to the Other, the individual that is not oneself, but outside of the self. This is of the highest ethical order as it is an awareness of one’s crucial place in humanity. It is not a static place; it is active and interactive.

As media content producers will attest, audiences have reached the saturation point of exposure. Mediated messages continue to be distributed in the traditional ways of print, image, sound, and motion media. Now, even the desktop or laptop computer can seem like “old news” as a form of receiving media content. With the ever-increasing sophistication of mobile devices, media is on demand and on the move. Trends indicate a future where the media audience’s consumption is tailored and streamed per each user’s taste and timetable. Today, media consumers can select only the news they want and via RSS it is fed to their phone. Television watching can be easily programmed
and pre-recorded to be viewed when it’s most convenient for the individual. Music and books are downloaded and users are given recommendations based on their listening and reading habits. One’s media consumption can be almost completely tailored to his or her lifestyle. However, this doesn’t free audiences from their responsibilities as an audience member. In fact, it prompts them to be more aware of the inherent biases that align with their social, political, economic, and cultural habits. As consumers of mediated messages audiences must always consider the source and its motivation.

To be an aware and responsible audience member is no easy task. It requires active and interactive participation with received mediated messages. James Aucoin argues in his article “Implications of Audience Ethics for the Mass Communicator” that both the audience and the mass communicator must take responsibility for the media produced and distributed to society. Aucoin creates a specific track for audience accountability and engagement. His rules apply to a fully ethical MCM and, in accepting the ethical responsibility required of mass media communication, places equal responsibility and ownership on audiences. Ownership is not just achieved in the creation of a thing. For audiences, ownership of media forms when one’s personal narrative intersects and, even more so, combines with the mediated message’s narrative. This hybrid narrative creates stakeholders, fans, and loyal consumers. When audiences acknowledge this ownership, it is a strong catalyst toward the ethical engagement of media and society.

Aucoin argues that audiences should:

1. Agree to converse. Agree to engage in public dialogue. Talk back to your TV sets, your newspapers, and your magazines. [And by extension your computers, phones, and portable media devices.]
2. Demand sufficient evidence before you accept a report or story as representing a truthful account.
3. Retain a healthy degree of skepticism even when you are willing to accept a report as truthful. No report can be the final report. What will the next report say? What will the next source tell you? Truth-seeking about public and social issues must by nature be a continual process. It can never be an arrival.
4. Identify and challenge ideologies of message senders. What unspoken beliefs about the world have molded and shaded the message?
5. Recognize and challenge private motives of public communicators. What hidden agendas have affected the message?
6. Bring to a mediated dialogue your own understandings derived from past experiences and fact gatherings and contrast and compare them in a critical way with the mediated message. Insist that the message’s narrative “hang together” in a logical manner. Insist that it make sense before you believe it. (74)
The essays that follow are meant to be placed in conversation with Aucoin’s rules. When doing so, readers begin to shape an understanding of their social and personal role in the Media Cycle Model. An ethical MCM contains required responsibilities that are distinct to the mass communicator and the audience, as well as shared responsibilities. Aucoin concludes his essay with a clear model of audience and mass communicator responsibilities. In his Audience and Communicator Ethics Matrix, mass communicators should be motivated by professional ethics, allow for audience feedback, and present messages in a transparent way acknowledging the limitations inherent in a specific media delivery system and the content it produces. In compliance with an ethical mass communication model, audiences should apply Aucoin’s media audience ethics rules as set down earlier. When this is done audiences are fulfilling their obligation to society, which is an existence that is dependent on our relationship to others. Finally, Aucoin’s Audience and Communicator Ethics Matrix requires both audience and mass communicator to share responsibility for accuracy, truthfulness, and fairness. They must foster openness to a multitude of personal narratives and understandings, and they must show respect to the Other. They must encourage an atmosphere of transparency, freedom, and dialogue in an effort to resolve conflict (78).

In order to encourage the audience/mass communicator ethical relationship this text is arranged in three parts. Part I: Media/Ethics presents common ethical situations raised in personal and mass communication. The essays cover communication ethics, ethical controversies, journalism, and the problems presented in censorship. The collection begins with Donald K. Wright’s “Communication Ethics,” a primer on the major issues of ethics in communication. It covers a range of topics including ethical theories and codes, ethical decision making, ethics and law, and ethics and research. The study of ethical foundations then moves to current issues in ethics and media. Richard Keeble examines contemporary ethical and moral issues in print, broadcasting, and digital media in “Ethical Controversies Today: An Overview.” “In Journalism and Ethics: Can They Co-exist?,” Andrew Belsey argues for a virtue in journalism that acts in an ethically correct way as it balances journalism as industry and public servant. Lastly, Anthony Ellis’ “Censorship and the Media,” addresses freedom of speech. He argues for a non-paternalistic government that understands that freedom of speech is freedom to listen, and that both audiences and government should take responsibility for the protection and favor of freedom of speech.

Part II: Media/Society confronts the reader with his and her place in the Media Cycle Model of mass communication. Through a variety of media outlets, cultural issues, and audience studies, the essays redirect the conversation from the ethical obligations of mass media to the roles and attitudes of the audience. Even further, the essays are a study of specific audiences and their engagement with mediated messages. In these essays, the reader will find himself and the Other. S. Elizabeth Bird’s “Beyond the Audience, Living in a Media World” argues that methodology is a critical
concern when interpreting audience research results. Turning toward television audiences, John Fiske and John Hartley’s groundbreaking text *Reading Audiences* provides the essay “Audiences.” The brief, but important, essay describes the relationship between television and the divisions of its audience. In “Broadcast Publics,” Richard Butsch discusses broadcast media’s relationship and obligation to the public sphere. Especially important in a world of ever-changing and rapidly advancing online social networks, Susan B. Barnes’s “Understanding Social Media from the Media Ecological Perspective,” provides a study of computer mediated communication and its effects and implications on human communication. In “Advertising and Common Sense,” Iain MacRury assesses advertising and its social impact, whose existence is made up of a variety of stakeholders from consumers to media corporations and lobbyists to industry regulators. The final two essays in the section turn toward specific audiences. Catherine Squires’s “Black Audiences, Past and Present: Media Critics and Activists” surveys how Black audiences have used Black media to respond to, critique, and protest against mainstream media and its representations of African-Americans. Lastly, Bill Osgerby’s “Rockin’ All Over the World: Globalization and ‘Youth Media’” observes the far-reaching impact of youth culture as it approaches cultural imperialism.

Lastly, Part III: Media/Democracy covers the arrival of the interactive engagement and creation of media by audience members. The democratization of media creation through new technologies has exploded the creation of mass media. Millions are now given a voice, a voice that contributes to both the discourse and the clutter. Audience members have the ability to interact and create media at an unprecedented level. Now, the audience not only exists as receiver, but also creator of media content. This requires a deeper reflection of one’s ethical obligation to society. The essays herein will contribute to the student/audience’s reflection on their place in the Media Cycle Model. In the daring “‘Get a Life!’ Fans, Poachers, Nomads,” Henry Jenkins presents fandom as a permanent and important culture, one in which audience becomes producer. Jenkins argues that the world of fandom is a prime place for studying popular appropriation and textual poaching. Robert A. Hackett and William K. Carroll’s “Democratizing Society: Social Movements and Public Communication” presents a survey of the forms of social movements and media activism as a way to reshape and influence public communication. Finally, Zizi Papacharissi’s “Audiences as Media Producers: Content Analysis of 260 Blogs” is a quantitative analysis of bloggers as media producers and presents blogs as a self-serving use of the Internet.
WORKS CITED


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Although the study of ethics has been a significant part of social science scholarship for centuries and of communication study for many decades, it is a huge understatement to say the importance of ethics in communication has increased dramatically during the first years of the current century. There are many reasons for this, including, but not necessarily limited to, serious ethical questions that concern communication scholars and practitioners. Some of these questions center upon the tactics journalists use to get information as the news business has become increasingly competitive in today’s era of the non-stop, 24/7 news cycle complete with 24-hour news channels coupled with newspaper and broadcast station websites, not to mention bloggers and others who disseminate information through what have become known as consumer generated information channels. There has been some focus on public relations as this aspect of communication has advanced from merely helping organizations to say things, to providing guidance and counsel regarding what these organizations should do and how they should do it. Advertising, organizational communication and other aspects of the field also have faced their own stream of new ethical questions and concerns.

Philip Meyer (1987), who enjoyed two distinguished professional careers in the communication field—first as a newspaper reporter with The Miami Herald and then as a journalism professor at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill—called communication ethics “a slippery topic,” and likened the assignment of defining ethical behavior to the task of defining art (p. vii).

Ethics—in all aspects of communication study and practice—has attracted a good deal of attention over the past few decades. Many who work in various aspects of
communication are bombarded regularly with diverse ethical cues, and too few of these communications practitioners really have developed frameworks for making ethical judgments. This [selection] explores the concept of ethics from several perspectives, aiming at a broad understanding of the pragmatic, the conceptual, and the practical implications of communication ethics across disciplinary areas.

THE DESIRE TO BE ETHICAL

The desire for ethical behavior depends entirely upon the actions of individuals and the assumption that these people wish to act responsibly. Goodpaster and Matthews (1989) addressed three important concerns in terms of the ethical responsibility of individuals: someone is to blame, something has to be done, and some kind of trustworthiness can be expected.

The first of these affects an individual’s action and whether he or she was responsible for the action. The second exists in circumstances in which individuals are responsible for others: lawyers to clients, physicians to patients; or, in the communication context, journalists to their readers, public relations professionals to their organizations, and the public, and so on. The third meaning of ethical responsibility focuses on the individual’s moral reasoning and the intellectual and emotional processes connected to it. Thus, ethical responsibility rests on the decisions people make regarding who is responsible for acting responsibly. These decisions are influenced by a variety of factors, most of which are often beyond the individual’s understanding at the time (the individual is unprepared to deal with them for a variety of reasons, including lack of training in ethical reasoning), deal with a relationship with another person, or other persons, or communication environmental factors. However looked at, communication ethics boils down to making—or not making—a decision.

Ethics and Decision Making

The topic of ethics has attracted a good deal of attention throughout the communication community over the past few decades. Although those working in journalism, advertising, broadcasting, public relations, organizational communication, corporate communications, and communication education are bombarded with many diverse ethical cues, too few really have developed frameworks for making ethical judgments.

Ethics is the division of philosophy that deals with questions of moral behavior. Making ethical decisions in the communication environment is easy when the facts are clear and the choices are black and white. It’s a different story when ambiguity clouds the situation along with incomplete information, multiple points of view, and conflicting responsibilities. In such situations, ethical decisions depend on both the decision-making process and on the decision makers—their experience, intelligence, and integrity.
Much of the applied communication and ethics literature centers on the role of the decision maker in ethical behavior. Although communication professionals do not always make decisions, their counsel quite frequently enters that decision-making process. There are circumstances where the decision-making role rests firmly within the communication function. An important aspect of many communication jobs is trying to help management make decisions.

In this process, the ethical question might be whether or not to say something as much as it might be whether or not to do something. Unfortunately, for some it is easy: to say nothing and later blame the unethical results on somebody else’s decision. Dick Rosenberg (1991), Chairman of the Bank of America, told an audience of corporate communication professionals that, “We don’t shoot people for bringing us bad news; we shoot them for delivering it too late.” This view suggests that communications managers who can head off serious problems before they blow up in the company’s face, surface in a newspaper’s columns, or ruin an individual’s reputation are two steps ahead of the game.

George (2007) encourages people to have an “internal compass that guides you successfully through life” (p. xxiii). He says individuals should establish personal ethical boundaries that could become “moral compasses (that) will kick in when you reach your limits and tell you it is time to pull back, even if the personal sacrifices may be significant” (p. 101). George claims that’s what Enron executives Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling lacked during the crisis that destroyed their company. According to George, a good way to understand individual ethical boundaries is to apply what he calls “the New York Times test.”

Before proceeding with any action, ask yourself, “How would I feel if this entire situation, including transcripts of our discussions was printed on the first page of the New York Times?” If your answers are negative, then it is time to rethink your actions; if they are positive, you should feel comfortable proceeding, even if others criticize your actions later. (p. 101)

Outside of individual responsibility, people must assume that they work for somebody who wants to be told the truth. Further, that truth should be respected. Some system of ethics must serve as a cornerstone for any civilized society. Communication cannot be effective without being ethical and socially responsible.

Unfortunately, the people who make the decisions in American business do not always possess responsible moral judgments. Harvard business school professor Kenneth R. Andrews (1989) contends that ethical decisions require three qualities that can be identified and developed by individuals. These are:
1. Competence to recognize ethical issues and to think through the consequences of alternative resolutions.
2. Self-confidence to seek out different points of view and then to decide what is right at a given place and time, in a particular set of relationships and circumstances.
3. “Tough-mindedness,” which is the willingness to make decisions when all that needs to be known cannot be known and when the questions that press for answers have no established and incontrovertible solutions. (p. 2)

Some Basic Questions

Most people understand the clear-cut differences in moral choice. They can recognize and decide what is good or evil, right or wrong, honest or dishonest. There is, however, a faulty assumption held by many in our society that communication practitioners can be unethical—as long as they resolve conflicting claims in their own hearts and minds. There are people who often resort to certain rationalizations that appear to justify questionable behavior.

Although ethical decisions are often hard enough to make, there is much more to communication ethics than struggling with the short-range decisions on a case-by-case basis. Ethical communication begins with individuals’ capacity for socially constructing a long-range moral realism.

One way or another, most people break some law at least once every day. Those who fall into that category rationalize away some of their illegal (and morally wrong) behavior. The speed limit is 55 miles-per-hour but a person drives at 62 (“everyone’s doing it; it would be unsafe to do otherwise”). People jaywalk (“no traffic, why walk to the corner and then back?”). Healthy people sometimes park their cars in places reserved for handicapped drivers. Merely breaking the law, however, is not necessarily equivalent to acting unethically; sometimes adhering to the law can be unethical, as examples of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi illustrate.

Communication scholars often see ethically perplexing situations where deciding who is ethical and who is not might depend more upon individual or organizational beliefs than anything else. Paul (1994) pointed out that although the fast-food industry frequently gets called unethical for producing food that is high in fat and cholesterol and encourages obesity, nobody forces people to eat the products of the fast-food restaurant industry. In recent years, retailers have been accused of being unethical for encouraging the concept of “vanity sizing,” which involves changing labels “extra large” sized clothes to “large” or “medium” so customers will ignore the reality they are gaining weight. As the New York Times (2007) pointed out, when controversial nationally syndicated radio “shock-jock” Don Imus was fired for making racially and sexually insulting remarks, some questioned why the exact same
words Imus used on the radio are allowed to be broadcast daily as part of the genre known as rap music. Poniewozik (2007) said although “it was clear he [Imus] crossed a line. What’s unclear is. Where’s the line and who can cross it?” (p. 32). Carr (2007) addressed the Imus situation this way, pointing out that remarks such as Imus made were much less damaging years ago before new technologies were a factor in the ethics of communication:

Mr. Imus is an old school radio guy caught in a very modern media paradigm. When he started 30 years ago, if he made the same kind of remark, it would have floated off into the ether—the Federal Communications Commission, if it received complaints, might have taken notice, but few others.

But radio is now visible—Mr. Imus’s show was simulcast on MSNBC, and more to the point, it is downloadable. By Friday, reporters and advocates could click up the remark on the Media Matters for America website, and later YouTube, and see a vicious racial insult that delighted him visibly as it rolled off his tongue. The ether now has a memory.

Time heals, time forgets, but Mr. Imus was seeking to shore up his career immediately. Mr. Imus never caught a breath because he was in the middle of a 24-hour news cycle that kept him in the crosshairs. It is the kind of media ceremony that generally ends in a human sacrifice. (2007, pp. C1, C5)

DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF ETHICS

As noted earlier, ethics is the branch of philosophy that deals with questions of moral behavior. It is similar to a set of principles or a code of moral conduct (Fink, 1988). The study of ethics can provide the tools for making difficult moral choices. Students of communication do not need to know as much about how to make ethical decisions as they need to possess the knowledge and ability to defend critical judgments on some rational basis. Perhaps more than anything else, they need to recognize ethical problems when they arise.

It is inevitable that conflicts among competing values will emerge in this process. The study of ethics and moral reasoning cannot necessarily resolve such conflicts, but they can provide the tools to make it easier to live with difficult ethical choices. And, cutting through the rhetoric, most—if not all—know when we are ethical and when we are not.

According to ethics scholar Richard Johannesen (1983), ethical situations are multifaceted. They usually arise when a moral agent (the one making the ethical decision) commits an act (either verbal or nonverbal) within a specific context with a
particular *motive* directed at an *audience*. Johannesen argues that each factor must be taken into account before passing judgment on the outcome of any moral scenario.

As a formal field of inquiry, ethics can be further divided into three related subareas (Callahan, 1988). *Meta-ethics* attempts to assign meanings to the abstract language of moral philosophy. *Normative ethics* provides the foundation for decision making through the development of general rules and principles of moral conduct. *Applied ethics* is concerned with using these theoretical norms to solve real-world ethical problems. Each provides ethics scholars with areas from which to construct ethical frameworks at varying levels of the decision-making process, from the language used in rationalizing an ethical decision to applying an ethical framework in real-world situations.

**WHY THIS CONCERN ABOUT ETHICS?**

Why this concern about communication ethics? One popular answer suggests that Americans have become morally adrift without traditional anchors. We have compromised our individual ethics so frequently that it sometimes becomes just as easy to compromise our professional ethics.

Followers of Sigmund Freud suggest that the development of moral character and habits of moral thought essentially are complete in early childhood. This Freudian view meets considerable resistance, particularly from Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) and his followers who believe that moral development undergoes significant structural changes well into adulthood.

Despite some huge differences between these two theses, there is strong agreement that moral development is *learned* behavior. The following scenario, filled with communication examples, forces us to think about that:

A man and a woman take their two children, whose ages are 6 and 13, to a movie. The neighbors think they’re great parents. En route to the theatre the man breaks the speed limit, drives through one stoplight after it has turned from green to amber and fails to come to a complete stop at two separate stop signs. He also fails to signal while making turns and changing lanes. Just before purchasing the movie tickets, the woman tells the 13-year-old to claim he is 12, so the parents can pay the less expensive children’s ticket rate. After the movie the family eats in a buffet restaurant. The parents ask the 6-year-old to claim she is 5 so they can pay less. What message do these children learn from these examples?

Does it matter that the man was speeding? Does it matter that there was no other traffic at the intersections where he did not completely stop at the stop signs?
A week later the 13-year-old is arrested for shoplifting at a local mall. The parents, and the neighbors, wonder why.

Many of these decisions present us with difficulty. Some ethical decisions are simple. Others are more complex. If you support abortion you are a killer of babies; if you oppose abortion you do not respect the rights of women. To attempt to justify a principle morally, belief, attitude, policy, or action is to seek good reasons in support of it. Good reasons are reasons you are willing to commend to others rather than simply accept privately.

A large portion of our concern about ethics comes from a realization that possessing a system of ethics is not merely a sufficient condition for social intercourse, but is a necessary requirement. Ethics is the foundation of advanced civilization, a cornerstone that provides some stability to society’s moral expectations. In the communication business it is essential that we enter into agreements with others. As such, we must be able to trust one another to keep those agreements—even if to do so is not always in our best self-interest.

Ethics not only has to be the cornerstone of effective practice of organizational communication, it also must be the cornerstone of any civilization where virtues such as truth, honesty, and integrity are to prevail. A system of ethics is essential for:

1. building trust and cooperation among individuals in society;
2. serving as a moral gatekeeper in apprising society of the relative importance of certain moral values;
3. acting as a moral arbitrator in resolving conflicting claims based on individual self interests; and
4. clarifying for society the competing values and principles inherent in emerging and novel moral dilemmas.

**Can Ethics Be Taught?**

There are two schools of thought on the question of whether ethics can be taught. One school claims it is a waste of time to study ethics because moral character and habits of moral thought are fully developed even before children begin formal education. Advocates of this position (e.g., Freud, 1923/1961; Simon, 1971) pointed out that knowledge about ethical principles does not always produce moral behavior. These skeptics also believe that the process of moral development is completed in most people before they are 6 years old. They do not believe the teaching of ethics in public schools is needed, much less at colleges and universities.

The other school of thought views ethics as a subject like history, sociology, chemistry or mathematics. Advocates (e.g., Florman, 1978; Jaska & Pritchard, 1994; Toffler,
1986) argue that ethics has its own sets of standards and rules as well as distinctive methods of problem solving.

The study of ethics comes with its own unique set of problems. More than most academic subjects, ethical viewpoints are shaped and molded through a variety of different aspects of society. A person’s individual ethical beliefs are the product of many factors, including family, religion, economic status, environment, age, gender, race, and so forth.

One of the strongest arguments in favor of studying ethics comes from scholars who believe in the process of moral reasoning (e.g., Kohlberg, 1981). These scholars believe ethics involves much more than memorizing a list of ethical principles and view ethics instruction as an important component in moral conduct because it provides information and perspectives that people need to make ethical judgments.

Ethical decisions are not made in a vacuum. Day (1991) pointed out that these decisions involve a variety of considerations which can be grouped into three categories: (1) the situational definition; (2) an analysis of the situation; and (3) the ethical judgment. Advocates of moral reasoning view it as a structured, systematic approach to ethical decision making. It also provides an intellectual means of defending ethical judgments against criticisms. The Hastings Center (1980), a pioneer in ethics education, recommended these five steps be followed in preparing people to be effective in the process of moral reasoning: stimulating the moral imagination, recognizing ethical issues, developing analytical skills, eliciting a sense of moral obligation and personal responsibility, and tolerating disagreement.

ETHICAL THEORIES
The study of ethics is certainly not new. In his history of philosophy, Anders Wedberg (1982) traces ethical theories to antiquity, to the ancient Greeks. From these early beginnings can be traced the modern moral questions that contemporary communication researchers and theorists now study.

Classical Ethical Theory
The study of ethics began in ancient Greece with Socrates (c. 470–399 bc), who claimed virtue could be identified and practiced. Plato (c. 428–348 bc), who was his disciple, advocated moral conduct, even in situations when responsible behavior might run counter to societal norms. Plato’s student, Aristotle (384–322 bc), argued that moral virtue often required tough choices.

Development of the Judeo-Christian ethic brought forward the concept of “love thy neighbor as thyself,” which introduced the importance of a love for God and all other people. In the 18th century, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), a German philosopher,
introduced the *categorical imperative* which was a duty-based moral philosophy. Kant (1785/1982) believed in the duty to tell the truth even if it resulted in harm to others. Partially in response to Kant came the progressive relativism school of thought that believes what is right or good for one is not necessarily right or good for another, even under similar circumstances.

Classical ethical theory views ethical obligation in two different ways. *Teleological ethics* underscores the consequences of an act or decision, whereas *deontological ethics* emphasizes the nature of an act or decision.

The teleological approach deals with two basic approaches, *ethical egoism* and *utilitarianism*. Egoists make decisions based on what result is best for them, whereas utilitarianism attempts to foster whatever is best for the entire society. The tradition of egoism dates to Epicurus (c. 342–271 bc), who advocated people should do those things that would lead to their own satisfaction (Albert, Denise, & Peterfreund, 1980). Writings of more contemporary egoism theorists, such as Ayn Rand (1964), are much more a blend of reason and justification of self-interest. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) is noted as the founder of utilitarianism, a philosophy that endeavors to provide “the greatest happiness for the greatest number” (Christians, Rotzoll, & Fackler, 1987, pp. 12–13). Bentham’s “hedonistic calculus” was designed to serve as a manual to direct his followers in taking appropriate actions. Now seen as old-fashioned, the calculus has given way to the broad overview of Bentham’s philosophy. The more modern versions of utilitarianism focus on either acts or rules. *Act utilitarianism* places little value in precepts, claiming rules such as “thou shalt not kill,” “never lie,” and so forth, only provide rough directions for moral and ethical experiences. *Rule utilitarianism*, in contrast, is more concerned with what rule or action, when followed, will maximize the greatest good rather than with what rule or action will result in the greatest good result (Boyce & Jensen, 1978).

In examining the nature of the act in determining the lightness of an action, deontologists believe there are acts that are moral or immoral by their very nature, regardless of consequences or outcome. Immanuel Kant generally is considered the forefather of deontological ethics. He is especially known as the seminal thinker in *pure rule deontology*, by which people follow a rationally derived duty to tell the truth. Another branch of this thinking, known as *pure act deontology*, asserts that because no two circumstances are alike the nature of acts and decisions constantly change (Kant, 1785/1982). As such, act deontologists reject reason as a means to calculate moral conduct and are influenced more by the urgency of the moment and their innate ethical sense. Some deontologists consider not only the nature of an act in determining its lightness, but also its consequences. These people are known as *mixed deontologists* (Lambeth, 1986).

As ethical theory and research developed in the traditional areas of scholarship—philosophy, the classics, and so forth—*moral rules* came to represent the fuel
that powered the ethical system. They provided guideposts for resolving ethical dilemmas and posed moral duties on individuals. In fulfilling moral duties people took into account all parties, including themselves, who may be touched by our ethical decisions.

**Moral Reasoning Theories**

Four criteria form the basis of any system of ethics. These are shared values, wisdom, justice, and freedom. First of all, an ethical system must have shared values. Before ethical judgments can be made, society must reach agreement on its standards of moral conduct. Second, these standards should be based on reason and experience. They should seek to harmonize people’s rights and interests with their obligations to their fellow citizens. Third, a system of ethics should seek justice. There should be no double standard of treatment unless there is an overriding and morally defensible reason to discriminate. Finally, an ethical system should be based on freedom of choice. Moral agents must be free to render ethical judgments without coercion. Only in this way will the individual’s ethical level of consciousness be raised.

In the cosmopolitan sense of the terms, ethics and moral values outline the ideals and standards people should live by. However, as those who study ethics quickly realize, no set of principles exists that will solve all ethical dilemmas. Much of the literature involved with communication ethics views ethics with a focus on what too many people refer to as *degrees of rightness and wrongness*. While ethics certainly deals with truth, fairness, and honesty, in the United States at least, the legal environment has the clear-cut mandate to be concerned with right and wrong.

**DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LAW AND ETHICS**

The central core of what ethics and morality are all about deals with differences between what is *good* or *bad*. Laws focus on questions of what is *right* or *wrong*. Although it is possible for a law to be bad, something ethically good always should be right. Societies make and change laws, but ethical principles, theoretically at least, remain constant over time.

For example, for decades in the United States certain laws prevented African-Americans and women from voting. Many considered these laws to be bad because they violated a greater good. And, of course, eventually these laws were changed. Although societies can enact these laws, they are not ethical. Most laws, however, are consistent with ethical philosophy. Few would challenge laws that protect members of a society against those who murder, rape, or commit armed robbery. However, laws frequently are challenged by members of society who do not believe the ordinances are good.
VARIOUS SETS OF LOYALTIES

The morally and ethically responsible person gives each set of loyalties its share of attention before rendering an ethical determination. For most of us the following categories must be examined: duty to ourselves, duty to one’s organization or firm, duty to professional colleagues, and duty to society.

These loyalty sets provide interesting questions for professional communicators. Some newspaper journalists might believe their first duty is to their readers, advertising people could think their first loyalty to clients, public relations professionals might think their first loyalty is to client stockholders. An ethical issue could present itself for communicators if actions that might be moral for one public are unethical for another.

The issue of loyalty and ethics frequently surfaces in the area of religion, especially among fundamentalists. Muslim fundamentalists planned and carried out the horrible terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 while apparently believing they were performing actions approved by a supreme being. Christian fundamentalists have been accused of bridging unethical territory when they urge believers to rally against what others perceive as the human rights of women seeking abortions and homosexuals seeking a world devoid of prejudice based upon sexual preference.

ISSUES INVOLVING COMMUNICATION ETHICS RESEARCH

Most research involving ethics and responsibility in communication and related disciplines is concerned with problems of justice and duties—that is, good, truth, and right—and with stages of moral judgments and duties. Frankena (1963) claimed the academic study of ethics involves three kinds of normative or moral judgments. These include:

judgments of moral obligation or deontic judgments, which say a certain action is right or obligatory; judgments of morally good or aretaic judgments, which say that certain people, motives, or character traits are morally good, virtuous; and judgments of nonmoral value in which we evaluate not so much actions and persons but all sorts of other things including experiences, paintings, forms of government, and what not. (p. 147)

The study of ethics in contemporary communication public relations research and practice generally reflects some interpretation or judging of value systems and is representative of much contemporary research. As Wilcox, Ault, and Agee (1986) described it, “a person determines what is right or wrong, fair or unfair, just or unjust. It is expressed through moral behavior in specific situations” (p. 108).

Early work involving communication ethics usually considered the basic human need to function in honest and ethical ways. A good number of these articles also
combined ethics and professionalism while some concerned themselves with accreditation and licensing. Writings of Appley (1948), Bateman (1957), Bernays (1979, 1980), and Harlow (1951, 1969) justify this claim. Bateman was one of the first to encourage communication practice to develop a philosophic structure to serve as the source of its ethics. The early works of Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1993) and Flexner (1930) suggest that professions be “guided by altruism.” Greenwood (1966) and Liberman (1956) were among the first to mention a code of ethics as part of the criteria which must be satisfied for an “occupation” to be a “profession.”

**A Divergence of Communications Viewpoints**

Ethics in communication can be confusing, especially when scholars and practitioners do not always agree with their colleagues in other segments of the discipline.

Print and broadcast journalists, for example, frequently differ from people who work in public relations. These disagreements can be over simple matters such as whether or not journalists are ethical if they accept free food and beverages at press conferences. They also can entail more complex and serious controversy. For example, some journalists actually believe that anything that happens in public relations is unethical and would deny organizations the right to seek counsel on matters related to public opinion. Izard (1984–1985) reported that many journalists believe some forms of deception are permissible “if the situation demands it and circumstances are right” (p. 8). Some public relations people, on the other hand, point out that the media’s agendas often hurt society, even though they might sell publications and attract broadcasting audiences.

Disagreements of this nature were common during the Watergate scandals in the early 1970s. Although journalists praised the work of *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in exposing the misdeeds of big government, many public relations experts questioned the ethics that appeared to permit these journalists to practice deception while seeking information. In academic research, for instance, the ethical perceptions journalists and public relations professionals have for similar situations been found to differ (Ryan & Martinson, 1984).

**Codes of Ethics**

Any discussion about communication ethics would not be complete without devoting some time to issues such as licensing, accreditation, and codes of ethics. In some ways, ethical research involving these topics has raised more issues than it has resolved. Rarely, if ever, is the total agreement regarding topics such as licensing, accreditation, and codes of ethics.

In all likelihood American communication professionals never will become licensed by the government. One reason for this might be found in the First Amendment. Print
and broadcast journalists as well as those who work in public relations, advertising, and organizational communication, hold strong beliefs suggesting free and open communication for all is more important than the restrictions some would face through licensing in any of these areas.

Codes of ethics are fairly commonplace throughout the communication industry. Most communication professional organizations have ethical codes. The most noted of these codes are those of the Society of Professional Journalists, the Public Relations Society of America, the International Public Relations Association, and the International Association of Business Communicators. Such codes represent industry self-regulation in the absence of government restrictions and are controversial to say the least (Bernays, 1979, 1980).

Although many have praised the merits of communication codes of ethics, critics point out these codes usually are unenforceable. They also are dismissed by many as being merely cosmetic (Merrill & O’Dell, 1983). Still, supporters claim the field is better with them than without them. Just as the voluntary nature of codes of ethics makes most of them unenforceable, professional accreditation programs have not made ethical codes any more accountable, and this situation is unlikely to change in Western society.

The fact that there are no legal restrictions on the practice of communication—as there are in law or medicine—poses dilemmas for the communication industry that must be resolved. The problem is that any person—qualified or not—who wants to work in journalism, public relations, broadcasting, advertising, or any other aspect of communication in most Western nations, can do so. Violations of conduct codes have kept a small minority out of some professional organizations, but codes cannot prevent them from working in the field.

Codes of ethics in communication have some strengths and can be valuable, but their voluntary nature—that is, their inability to be enforced—breeds inherent problems. Most codes of ethics for communication-related associations are filled with meaningless rhetoric, do not accomplish much, and are not taken seriously by most of the people who work in organizational communication. These codes might be able to make ethical behavior less likely because of awareness. With or without professional codes of conduct, most who practice communication will choose to be ethical because they behave ethically themselves and want others to respect them. In light of the voluntary nature of these codes, most communicators are ethical because they want to be, not because they have to be. Some claimed that enforcement of these codes often is infrequent and uneven (e.g., Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1985). Others pointed out that many communications professionals do not belong to professional associations and note the inability of these organizations to prohibit these nonmember practitioners from violating these codes, even if the organization belongs to or adheres to a professional code of conduct (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).
Is Ethics an Individual Issue?

Our own studies of communicators in a number of contexts—including corporate communications, public relations, broadcasting and journalism—suggest that ethics is an individual issue, claiming it is up to individual practitioners to decide whether or not to be ethical regardless of professional ethical codes (Wright, 1976, 1979, 1982, 1985).

Although not dealing directly with the wide variety of occupational duties in public relations practice—including the four Grunig (1976) models of practice and the Broom-Dozier (Broom & Dozier, 1986) assessment of different practitioner roles—a major assumption of this doctrine of the individual implies press agents could be as ethical as the two-way symmetrical communicators if they had such a desire (see chapter 29). It also would contend that communication managers are not necessarily more ethical than communication technicians. We have suggested many times that public relations and communication never will be any more ethical than the level of basic morality of the people who are in public relations. This is to agree with those who claim the occupational or professional ethics of a person cannot be separated from that individual’s personal ethics. Indeed one major sign of ethical and moral maturity, in Kohlberg’s (1981) opinion, is the ability to make ethical judgments and formulate moral principles on our own rather than our ability to conform to moral judgments of people around us. Scholars have supported this argument for centuries. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all stressed the importance of individual moral convictions in their writings about ethics.

Ethics in Group Decision Making

Most ethical choices center around decision making. Although some decision-making situations in organizational communication involve the individual, most include task-oriented small groups of employees.

Modern-day organizations consider sensitivity to ethical behavior to be a strong leadership attribute. Although management groups are not always able to comprehend the ethical and moral value interpretations of all their decisions, groups try to avoid making unethical decisions. Dennis Gouran (1991) suggested five ideas that help encourage more ethical group decisions:

1. show proper concern for all affected by the group’s decision;
2. explore the discussion stage of decision making as responsibly as possible;
3. avoid misrepresenting any position or misusing any information;
4. do not say or do anything that could diminish any group member’s sense of self-worth; and,
5. make certain all group members respect each other. (pp. 166–167, 222)
Herbert E. Gulley (1968) provided another set of guidelines for ethical communication in small-group settings. These suggest:

1. communicators have the responsibility for defending the policy decisions of groups in whose deliberations they have participated;
2. communicators must be well informed and accurate;
3. communicators should actively encourage the comments of others and explore all viewpoints;
4. communicators should openly reveal their own biases and identify their sources of information;
5. communicators should neither lie, deceive, fabricate evidence, falsify facts, nor invent information or sources;
6. communicators should not attempt to manipulate group discussions unfairly so that selfish motives are served at the expense of the group; and,
7. communicators should avoid the use of tactics such as name calling, emotionally “loaded” language, guilt-by-association, hasty generalizations, shifting definitions, and oversimplified either-or alternatives. (pp. 334–366)

EXAMINING COMMUNICATION ETHICS RESEARCH

The contemporary study of ethics in communication research and practice is fairly young and generally reflects some interpretation or judging. Opinions about ethics and moral values in all aspects of communication vary widely. Some of the early research, particularly in journalism, attempted to determine what was right and what was wrong, fair or unfair, just or unjust. Other research approached the study of ethics through moral behavior in specific situations, much of which also considered the basic human need to function in honest and ethical ways.

Most of the research concerning ethics and communication employs a wide variety of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, traceable to three separate and unique areas: journalism and broadcasting, public relations, and speech communication. These studies include survey research, personal interviews, focus groups, experimental, and critical methods.

*Journalism* and *broadcasting studies* involving ethics have existed for nearly half a century. The Hutchins Commission report on freedom of the press in 1947 criticized print journalism for its lack of social responsibility (Hocking, 1947). Journalism ethics also concerns the First Amendment, business aspects of the mass media, invasion of privacy, the relationship between reporters and a wide variety of news sources, pornography and allegedly morally offensive material, and a variety of case study reports dealing with examples in many of these topical areas.
Most of these ethical topics are discussed thoroughly in four of the foremost books on the topic of journalism ethics. Rivers and Mathews (1988) provided a fairly thorough clarification of ethical issues combined with specific and practical suggestions for solutions. Their work included journalistic virtues, objectivity, basic news gathering, standards for news reporters, press councils, and media codes of ethics. The book also addresses sexism, investigative reporting, privacy, photojournalism, and freedom of the press. Christians, Flacker, and Rotzoll (1995) devoted several editions of a book that used commentaries and cases taken from actual media experiences to encourage journalists and other media practitioners to think analytically and to improve ethical awareness.

Lambeth (1986) concentrated on outlining the principles journalists should consider in making ethical judgments. His work also attempts to provide direction on to whom, or what, journalists owe professional loyalty—themselves, the public, an employer, or colleagues. Hulteng (1985) used the case study approach to illustrate the problems media practitioners face in making practical applications of ethical principles and moral standards. Meyer’s research (1987) involved a large survey of editors, publishers, and reporters and documents ethical confusion in American journalism during the Watergate and Pentagon Papers controversy. Swain (1978) explored how newspaper reporters handle the delicate questions of ethics that arise repeatedly in their pressured daily routines.

Public Relations ethics research studies began in the 1950s with articles that encouraged public relations to develop a philosophic structure to serve as the source of its ethics. Since then, a number of empirical studies examined various aspects of the public relations process including ethical questions concerning individual practice, dealings with the news media, and the overall improvement of professional working standards.

Ferre and Willihnganz (1991) reported that nearly 300 books or articles had been published on the subject of public relations ethics since 1922, which, since public relations considers itself to be the conscience of corporations and society, is a very low number indeed. Unlike other areas of communication, in which many books were written, Ferre and Willihnganz noted that most of the ethics articles that concern public relations are short essays. The majority also are positive articles, claiming, for the most part, that public relations people believe in honesty, integrity, and in telling the truth.

Speech Communication ethics research has been conducted from political, human nature, dialogical, and situational perspectives. The literature in this area also lists studies regarding ethics and various aspects of oral communication skills—public speaking, interpersonal, and small-group communication.

Much of the speech communication studies involving ethics explore ethical implications of a wide variety of human communication experiences, both oral and written. One of the most prolific scholars in this area is Richard L. Johannesen, whose work also attempts to provide direction to participants in the communication process and to encourage individuals to develop their own working approach to assessing communication ethics (e.g., Johannesen, 1983). Other leading research in this area includes Nilsen’s (1974) efforts to provide a general orientation by which to guide communication conduct, Barnlund’s (1962) insistence that all human communication theory must include moral standards specifications, and Miller’s (1969) perceptions about ethical implications between communicators and audiences.

**PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF COMMUNICATION ETHICS RESEARCH**

This section examines two practical applications of communication ethics research. One involves journalism; the other corporate communications. Both of these studies could be adapted to other aspects of communication research.

**Sample Journalism Ethics Study**

The journalism study involves the moral values of journalists that would be measured via a mail questionnaire sent to a large, random national sample of members of the Society of Professional Journalists.

Assuming a 40 percent return rate for studies of this nature, obtaining 350 usable responses would necessitate an initial mailing of no fewer than 875 questionnaires. If funding was available, 1,000 questionnaires would be mailed. Questionnaires, accompanied by a cover letter from a noted journalist encouraging participation in the study, and a self-addressed and stamped return envelope would be mailed to randomly selected participants. Any questionnaire of this nature would need to be extremely user-friendly and probably no longer than three or four pages to enhance the return rate.

In addition to a small number of basic demographic questions, the questionnaire would concentrate on three areas: perceived moral values of subjects themselves; perceived moral values of subjects’ peers; and, subjects’ job satisfaction. Questions could be arrived from any number of indices and previous research questions measuring these items. Data analysis would compare and contrast scores registered in each of these three areas. If additional funding could be acquired the researcher might wish to test results through five or six focus groups of journalists in various parts of the nation.
Sample Corporation Communication Ethics Study

The corporate communications study is concerned with the impact on corporate public relations professionals of organizational codes of ethics, sometimes known as corporate vision, values, or beliefs statements. The sample would consist of senior-level corporate public relations executives; the most likely sources for the sample’s population would be the directories of the Public Relations Seminar or the Arthur W. Page Society, both populated by senior-level public relations professionals.

Data gathering would consist of two parts. First, the researcher would identify several organizations that have corporate ethical codes, value statements, or similar codes. Ideally these would be Fortune 100 companies and should yield no fewer than five and no more than ten organizations. Public relations practitioners in these organizations would be surveyed in an attempt to measure the perceived impact these organizational behavior codes have on professional behavior in their specific organizations.

Second, public relations executives from other organizations would be surveyed to determine how they perceived the impact of these behavior codes. This external study also would attempt to gather information concerning the impact, if any, on corporate communications and public relations behavior caused through codes of ethics of professional societies such as the Public Relations Society of America and the International Public Relations Association. Data analysis would test for differences between the perceived effectiveness of various aspects of these codes of ethics.

CONCLUSION

All in all, those who work in various professional aspects of the field of communication have made considerable progress in the direction of more ethical behavior. The field has come a long way, but it still has a long way to go.

When it comes to the bottom line, the final arbiter in separating right from wrong or good from evil in communication is the decision maker. And the authenticity of any decision depends on a universal form of morality. The higher good is purity of motive rather than the good or harm of outcome. The central value in the unwritten contract people make with society is fairness or decision making guided by principles anyone and everyone would agree with.

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