

## THE ISSUE OF ETHICS IN THE MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION PROFESSION

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### Abstract

Media and Communication studies are well-known and attractive subjects in many universities and higher institutions, but the core of both subjects is not so popular and not viewed as a necessary subject by the scholars of media and communication. The writer of this humble article views this abnormal phenomenon as a disaster that jeopardizes the existence of the media and the lives of media practitioners. The illegal imprisonment of media practitioners, in addition to numerous cases of their murder, kidnaping, assault and all types of challenges and multiple acts of violence against journalists nowadays are nothing but a clear indication that there is something wrong. However, in a wrong situation like this, there is urgent need to correct such wrong. One of the main problems that need to be rectified is the issue of ethics in media. The society and more so, the authority need not to be taught that to be a journalist is not a crime but a legitimate type of career. This paper deals briefly with the issue of ethics in media and communication professionals and discusses some characters and code of conducts that are always categorized as a default of media by the consumers of the media products.

Keywords: Issue of ethics, Abnormal phenomenon, Multiple violence, Nature of Ethics, Ethical dimensions

### Abstrak

Media dan Komunikasi adalah subjek yang dikenali dan menarik di beberapa universiti dan institusi pengajian tinggi, tetapi teras bagi kedua-dua subjek tidak begitu terkenal dan tidak dilihat sebagai subjek yang diperlukan oleh Cendekiawan-cendekiawan

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media dan komunikasi. Penulis artikel ini menganggap fenomena yang tidak normal ini merupakan bencana yang membahayakan kewujudan media dan kehidupan pengamal media. Pemenjaraan haram pengamal media, sebagai tambahan kepada beberapa kes pembunuhan, culik, serangan dan semua jenis cabaran dan pelbagai tindakan keganasan terhadap wartawan pada masa kini hanyalah petunjuk jelas bahawa ada sesuatu yang tidak betul sedang berlaku. Walau bagaimanapun, dalam keadaan yang salah seperti ini, ada keperluan mendesak untuk membetulkan kesilapan tersebut. Salah satu masalah utama yang perlu diperbetulkan adalah isu etika dalam media. masyarakat dan lebih-lebih lagi, pihak berkuasa itu tidak perlu diajar bahawa untuk menjadi seorang wartawan bukan satu jenayah tetapi merupakan suatu kerjaya yang sah. Karya ini secara ringkas menerangkan isu etika dalam media dan profesional komunikasi dan membincangkan beberapa watak-watak dan kod tingkah laku yang sentiasa dikategorikan sebagai lalai media oleh pengguna produk media.

Kata kunci: Isu etika, Fenomena yang luar biasa, Pelbagai keganasan, Sifat Etika, Dimensi etika

## INTRODUCTION

The importance of media in public and private life leads to the concern about what the media and media professionals and audiences are doing in the society, and what the outcome and consequences of their acts may resort to. With regards to the media professionals' ethics and personal values, many still wonder about the quantity of inaccurate stories, character assassination, violence, sex, racial stereotypes and other questionable content that results from many of these media choices and stories. Therefore, the question arises as to what should guide media practitioners including journalists, executives, producers, and consumers in making ethical decisions. Although most people feel that they are ethical, and that many of the choices that face both media professionals and consumers are not as easy as they seem to surface. This chapter intends to take both the potential media professionals and the audience member through some of the main issues and choices, so that they we can be better informed producers and more media literature consumers.

Ethics are guidelines or moral rules about how professional communicators should behave generally and most especially in situations where their activities may have negative effects on other people, considering the fact that law does not dictate behavior. Some of these guidelines are codes of ethical conduct expressly created by professional organizations. Some of them represent broad systems of ethics prevailing in various societies today. Many groups also monitor media performance and try to convince both media practitioners and their audiences to make good choices in specific ways. Journalists themselves act as watchdogs over media. For example, violence in the media has been discussed for decades, resulting in government policies, industry self-regulation, and innumerable ethics-based decisions by individual writers and producers about violent contents. Often when we simply cannot find a consensus on which to base or make laws to govern the conduct of those in the media, we hope that individual ethics will suffice to address the problems that arise.

Journalist and other communicators are constantly making ethical decisions beyond what is specifically covered by policy or law. Ethical issues include what kinds of topics to cover; accuracy or truthfulness; privacy for media subjects; fairness in presenting all sides of an issue; what kinds of images to include in magazines, films, or television; and how to protect the confidentiality of sources. Laws, of course, affect many of these areas. Here, however, we consider the ethical dimensions.

For example, if you are a media professional, how much do you rely on sex, violence or other sensational material to capture the audience's interest for your magazine, radio station, television program, or film? To many outside the media profession, it seems that the media have gone overboard in using sex, and other sensations to sell media. However, the professionals see that many enjoy this content and pressure, so they use whatever means that appeals and whatever strategy that might work. Let's look at some typical examples.

Many magazines use sexy images on the cover to sell magazines. A look at the news standards shows lots of female cleavage and, increasingly, buff male chests, as well, on magazines from Rolling

Stone to Cosmo. The rise of several new magazines for young men, like Maxim and Stuff, shows that sex sells (see Media & Culture). They also seem to show that images in general sell, rather than text content. The ethical question is whether magazines just want to catch young people's attention, or whether they also actually tell them something in certain depth, beyond what they already know. Is there is any ethical responsibility to inform rather than titillate (Joseph & Robart, 2004).

### THE NATURE OF ETHICS

Ethics is the discussion of the judgments we make about the appropriateness, the right or wrong, of our actions and policies, be those actions communicative, political, social, personal, or a mixture of areas. Ethics is the study of what, ultimately, is the best course of action: How should we behave to have the most positive effect upon society and to become the best individuals we can?

Ethics tackles some of the fundamental questions of human life: How should people live? What should people do in particular situations?

The question is certainly not a new one; the search for answers is both ancient and cross-cultural. With its text dating back to 2,400 BC, the Egyptian Book of the Dead contains a kind of creed or standard of behavior which the virtuous were expected to recite to pass successfully from the world of the living to the realm of the dead. Among the statements, the virtuous are asked to affirm that "I have not oppressed the members of my family," "I have not defrauded the oppressed one of his property," an important consideration in an arid land (Budge, 1997). In ancient India, in its religion and philosophy, "truthfulness means more than a moral obligation to avoid deceit. It is revered as one of the greatest of human accomplishments and the grates service of person can render another".

Both Jewish and Christian scriptures have clear indications of how one is supposed to behave. The Ten Commandments and the Sermon of the Mount, for example, both contain guidelines for religion, marriage, treatment of others, honesty, and respect for the truth. According to Islam, the final heavenly message call for noble

morality in every aspect of life, brought peace and prosperity to humanity, calls for equality, justice and humanitarian deeds because all people are of one origin, Allah says in His Glorious Book;

“We have created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another, verily, the most honorable of you with Allah is that believe” [*Al-Qur’ān* 9: 13].

The Confucian Codes of China, dating from the sixth century, AD, detail how one should behave in a benevolent and virtuous way (Robert, 1995). Aristotle (384 – 322 BC) discusses what contributes to the creation of good and just society. His view is that ethics is a kind of “practical philosophy,” the applications about courses of action. Through the use of our rationality, we seek a virtue. For example Aristotle views generosity as a virtue which consists of giving “to the right people, the right amount, at the right time...” By practicing generosity, one avoids the vices of extravagant, spending too much on oneself, and stinginess,” a term which as for Aristotle meant “living well,” leading a rewarding and fulfilling life (Oswald, 1962).

The discussion of ethics has continued to be an area of discussion and research from its earliest beginnings until the present time. Even a quick search of listings in university library will yields a lengthy list of materials ranging from a general discussion of ethics in society to discussion of ethics in specific fields such as medicine, education, and law.

### **Ethical Issues for Media Professionals**

Freedom of speech and its complications: The first Amendment of America Constitution was originally framed to protect political and religious speech and choices. However, free speech rights have gradually been extended to sexuality and obscenity. The idea of exercising collective moral judgment on such issues is constrained by the United States Constitution, giving primacy to individual choice, both in what to say and what to listen to.

Courts have ruled that moral standards for treatment of sexuality and obscenity. That reflects a trend a trend parallel to ethics, to recognize

that different communities and traditions may set different standards. This makes for a very complicated discussion since many situations of ethical choice have both local and national repercussions.

Media professionals, both media on-air people or writers, as well as their producers and editors, still need to think about the ethics of using indecent language, in individual term (“do I really think this is a good idea?”), in institutional terms). For example, journalist faced difficult decisions with the Starr Whitewater report on the investigation of former President Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky. The report was very graphic, perhaps indecent in its language, so how closely should journalists summarize it? The internet presents new information services about what kinds of materials to permit on interactive services (Joseph & Robert, 2004).

### **Ethical Issues in the Islamic Perspective**

The Islamic moral system stems from its primary creed of belief in One God as the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe. The guiding principle for the behavior of a Muslim is what the Qur’an refers to as *Al `Amal Al-Sālih* or virtuous deeds. This term covers all deeds, not just the outward acts of worship.

Some of the most primary character traits expected of a Muslim are piety, humility and a profound sense of accountability to God. Islam is also concerned with the moral health of the society; Gratitude in prosperity, patience in adversity, and the courage to uphold the truth, even when inconvenient to oneself, are just some of the qualities that every Muslim is encouraged to cultivate. A Muslim is expected to be humble before God and with other people. Islam also enjoins upon every Muslim to exercise control of their passions and desires. The Glorious Qur’an says:

“It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces Towards east or West; but it is righteousness- to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; to fulfil the contracts which ye have made; and to be firm and patient, in

pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the Allah-fearing.” [*Al-Qur’ān* 2:177].

This verse underscores the Islamic belief that righteousness and piety is based, before all other things on a true and sincere faith. The key to virtue and good conduct is a strong relation with God, who sees all, at all times and everywhere. He knows the secrets of the hearts and the intentions behind all actions. Therefore, Islam enjoins moral behavior in all circumstances; God is aware of each one when no one else is. It may be possible to deceive the world, but it’s not possible to deceive the Creator. The love and continuous awareness of God and the Day of Judgment enables man to be moral in conduct and sincere in intentions, with devotion and dedication.

### **Ethical Communication**

To make the best decisions in our communication, to communicate ethically, we must give thought to the manner in which we communicate. Formulating a list of rules to be applied in the different communication situations in which we find ourselves would be a futile endeavor. The situation are too vast and too varying. Rather, we would do better to suggest guidelines for ethical communication, considerations which would shape communicating practice. Even though the definition of ethics is different from one scholar to other, but there are some codes of ethics that almost all of scholars and media practitioners agreed upon. The following are some of them:

## **CODES OF ETHICS**

### **Social Responsibility and Ethics**

Rather than relying on abstract basic principles such as “the golden mean”, according to Aristotle, some have tried to come up with more specific sets of guidelines to help individual communicators make ethical decisions. We will look at several and others. The recommendations of the 1947 Hutchins Commission on social responsibility in the media and the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics have been quite influential among journalists and broadcasters.

Perhaps its most important result was to popularize the idea that media professionals do have a responsibility to society. Since relatively few people get to create the professionals' media content that most people read, like major news magazines, or watch, like television network news, those who do not create that content need to consider the impact or what they do to society. In fact, in the United States, in this sense of social responsibility is the dominant prevailing ethics for media. Most professional journalists tend to at least profess this approach, that they have a professional duty to responsibly inform the public. Thus is particularly true of journalists. Others, however, say that this is a libertarian system in which media professionals can pretty much do anything not prohibited by law (Joseph & Robert, 2004).

### **Ethical Communicators Are Respectful of Their Audiences**

Communication is a two way process. Communication implies a party other than ourselves and attempt on our part to influence that person or party in some way. As one scholar has put the matter, "A communicator, with particular motives, attempts to achieve a specific end with a specific audience by employing (intentionally or unintentionally) communicative means or techniques to influence that audience" (Johannesen, 1990).

The nature of the influence we have on others will depend to a large extent on our attitudes towards our audiences. As several have observed, an ethical communicator is one who regards other persons as possessing inherent dignity and worth (Jaksa & Micheal, 1988). Human being are to be regarded not as means to ends but rather as valued participants whose welfare is a significant and considered part of the interaction.

In terms of practice, this principle means that audience analysis is an important part of communication. We cannot respond appropriately if we are ignorant of the people with whom we communicate.

Respect for audiences includes respect for the ideas and feelings of the people with whom we interact. If people possess dignity and worth, then need to be treated as such even when we may disagree with them strongly. Response to those opposing his ideas was, "Get



a life”. His reaction demeaned not only those disagreeing with him but own ideas as well.

### **Ethical Communicators Respect Truth**

A great deal of communication involves due respect for the truth. Indeed, as one has put it, the assumption of truth undergirds the very concept of communication itself: “an inherent end of belief” (Kupfer, 1982). If we cannot trust the other party, we cannot accurately judge how to respond, then our communication becomes increasingly ineffective. If the lack of trust is pervasive enough, it is destructive in the end to society.

Moreover, a scholar once observed that: “This is why some level of truthfulness has always been seen as essential to human society, no matter how deficient the observance of other moral principles” (Bok, 1989). We take for example ethical communication in small groups. Generally in small group work, our concern is focused on getting the job done while still maintaining reasonable relationships among group members. Although ethical communication tends to be more implicit in small group work, we seldom discuss it openly. Ethics in small groups involve three levels:

- a) Individual group member: “I didn’t complete the research on time for my part of the project. Should I think up an excuse? Or tell my group what happened: that I went to Las Vegas for the weekend instead of doing my research?”
- b) Group: Group A finds a published study that is identical to its project. Group members are pressed for time to complete their report. Should they just copy the study, making a few minor changes?
- c) Group environment: An organizational task force on safety identifies several current practices that put organization members at risk. Changing all those practices will cost the organization millions of dollars. Should the task force report all the findings to management? Or report only those that would be less costly?

Although some ethical dilemmas are more easy to solve than others, but nevertheless all challenges involve making evaluations and

judgments about what is morally right and wrong, what is fair and what is not fair, and what will cause harm and what will not cause harm.

### **Ethical Communicators do not Falsify Information**

Worse than the distortion of information, is falsifying information. Often times when we fail to find information useful to our goals, we make it up. For instance Lena Guerrero, a person active in Texas politics was appointed to an important state commission by a governor. Part of Guerrero's credentials was the notations of her graduation from the university of Texas and membership in Phi Beta Kappa, a prestigious honorary society. As the featured speaker at a college graduation, she waxed sentimental about her own graduation, saying, "Now, I remember well my own commencement, and I think I can guess what you're feeling about now" (Burka, 1992). Investigative reporters discovered some important facts about her college years: Guerrero attended college but fell nineteen hours short of the required minimum. She had no college degree; she never graduated. Nor was she ever a member of Phi Beta Kappa. She had lied about the situation. Such invention is highly unethical.

Another way of falsifying information is through plagiarism. Plagiarism is a kind of theft, intellectual theft. We plagiarize when we use the words or ideas of another and fail to credit the source. Instead of attributing the material to its original creator, we pretend the words or ideas are our own. When writing, we acknowledge sources by the use of quotation marks and include a citation of the source. When speaking, we acknowledge sources by naming them in the context of the speech.

If one were speaking, for example, about the problem dealing with aging pets, one could make the problem vivid for the audience by describing the behavior of an old beloved dog. The loyalty, affection, and trust of the dog and the owner's conflicting feelings could be poignantly pictured by a phrase such as "putting 'their kids' old dogs to sleep, friends that drool and quiver and stumble hobbling to our hands'." If ethical, the speaker, though, would give credit where credit is due by acknowledging the author: "As Walter McDonald aptly describes in his poem" (McDonald, 1988).

The most blatant form of plagiarism is appropriating the entire work of another. This type of plagiarism occurs when instead of composing their own speeches, students give speeches created by people other than themselves: their roommates, their friends, family members, or even professional writer. Besides fabricating a lie about the true composer, such plagiarism subverts the educational process. We do not learn to communicate by using a standard in any more than we learn to swim by having someone else take swimming lesson for us.

### **Ethical Communicators Respect the Rights of Other to Information**

A respect for the truth and an ethical consideration of other people's intellectual ownership also means respecting the rights of others in regard to information and access to information. Collecting information is an integral part of the research process, but stealing information is theft, taking something that does not belong to us. Beyond the personal act of theft, stealing information is unethical because it prevents other people from securing information and unnecessarily makes their lives more difficult.

For example, a periodical article may be useful to our speech, but we should either take notes on the material or photocopy it rather than cutting it out of the magazine. Cutting out the article robs others of the opportunity to read it and creates added expense for the library which must replace it. That expense, along with similar expenses, adds to the financial burden of the school and eventually, its students, including the person who tore out the article.

### **The Difficulty of Ethics**

Mass media organization have put together codes of ethics that prescribe how practitioners should go about their work, while useful in many ways, these codes neither sort through the bedeviling problems that result from conflicting prescriptions nor help much when the only open options are negative.

### **Prescriptive Ethics Codes**

The mass media abound with codes of ethics one of the earliest was adapted in 1923. "The canons of journalism of the American

society of Newspaper Editors” advertising, broadcast and public relations practitioners also have codes many newcomers to the mass media make an erroneous assumption that the answers to all the moral choices in their work exist in the prescriptions of these codes. While the codes can be helpful, ethics are not easy. The difficulty of understanding how ethics work becomes clear when a news reporter is confronted with a conflict between moral responsibilities to different concepts. Consider:

**Respect for Privacy.** The code of the society of professional journalists prescribes that reporters should show respect for the dignity, privacy, rights and wellbeing of people “at the times”. The SPJ prescription sounds excellent, but moral priorities such as dignity and privacy sometimes seem important than other priorities.

**Commitment to Timeliness.** The code of the radio, television news directors association prescribes that reporters be “timely and accurate” in practice, however, the virtue of accuracy is jeopardized when reporters rush to the air with stories, it takes time to confirm detail and be accurate and that delays stories.

**Being Fair.** The code of the public relations society of America prescribes dealing fairly with both clients and the general public. However, a persuasive message prepared on behalf of a client is not always the same message that would be prepared on behalf of the general public. Persuasive communication is not necessarily dishonest, but how information is marshaled to create the message depends on whom the PR is serving.

**Conflict in Duties.** Media ethics codes are well intended, usually helpful guides, but they are simplistic when it comes to knotty moral questions. When media ethicists’ difford Christians, Mark Fickler and Kim Rotzall compiled a list of five duties of mass media professionals, some of these inherent problem become obvious (John, 1999). Regarding codes of conduct and guidelines for professional journalist, the experts and media practitioners have laid down some necessary guidelines.

The guidelines were set up around two important ideas. The first guideline is that “whoever enjoys a special measure of freedom, like a professional journalist, has an obligation to society to use their freedoms and powers responsibly.” (Straubhaar, LaRose & Davenport, P. 477) This guideline is useful so that people in power are able to be held liable in case their actions are not professional. People that have high media attention should not abuse the power. The second guideline that was established is “society’s welfare is paramount, more important than individual careers or even individual rights.” (Straubhaar, LaRose & Davenport. 2010. P. 477)

Again, holding people responsible for their actions and stating that society is more important due to the vast number of people that could be affected by poor behavior.

The Hutchins Commission added another five guidelines specifically for the press, as follows: (Straubhaar, LaRose & Davenport. P. 477)

1. Present meaningful news, accurate and separated from opinion.
2. Serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism and to expand access to diverse points of view.
3. Project “a representative picture of the constituent groups in society” by avoiding stereotypes by including minority groups.
4. Clarify the goals and values of society; implicit was an appeal to avoid pandering to the lowest common denominator.
5. Give broad coverage of what was known about society.

All of these guidelines are important because the press is needed to maintain a neutral viewpoint, providing the basic facts and allowing for readers to come up with their own opinions from the news that they report. These guidelines inspired Society of Professional Journalists which is the current version of media ethics that were adopted in 1996, the matter of ethics in media professionals and communication is fact and even it is core of media itself, both media and ethics should move together side by side as mentioned by Stephen J.A. Ward (2014) that we are moving towards a mixed news media – a

news media citizen and professional journalism across many media platforms. This new mixed news media requires a new mixed media ethics – guidelines that apply to amateur and professional whether they blog, Tweet, broadcast or write for newspapers. Media ethics needs to be rethought and reinvented for the media of today, not of yesteryear.

## CONCLUSION

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that covers a whole family of things that have a real importance in everyday life. For the sake of our audiences, ourselves, and the people affected by our interactions we need to recognize the ethical component of our communication. Ethics is not just a matter of political or social policy or even an issue of media professionals, but it is also a part of our personal policies, as well as an integral part of our behavior and our regard for others. Ethical communication will incorporate a respectful view of its audiences, a consideration of the consequences of the communication for all parties involved, and a respect for truth. Such a view is both a challenge and a reward. The challenge for today's media ethics can be summarized by the question: Whither ethics in a world of multi-media, global journalism? Media ethics must do more than point out these tensions. Theoretically, it must untangle the conflicts between values. It must decide which principles should be preserved or invented. Practically, it should provide new standards to guide online or offline journalism.

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