



ETHICS AND MASS COMMUNICATION

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Ethics is the study of how people act in regard to other people. Different theories present different perceptions of morally ideal behavior, but minimal morality in all cases requires that *one should not cause another to suffer unnecessarily*. In addition, *one should justify one's actions if those actions are likely to lead others to suffer*. Some argue that you can justify causing individuals to suffer if what you are doing will bring about the greatest good for the greatest number. Others say that you can justify causing suffering if you are acting in a way that recognizes individual rights as having priority and gives the trump card to the most vulnerable. But all hold that behavior that violates the general admonishment "*Don't cause others to suffer*" must be justified to be moral.

One twentieth century ethical theory, developed by philosopher Bernard Gert, provides a list of moral rules that follow from the basic idea, "Don't cause others to suffer unnecessarily."¹ These moral rules, in turn, form a basis from which to explain professional responsibility and restraint: (1) don't kill, (2) don't cause pain, (3) don't disable, (4) don't deprive of pleasure, (5) don't deprive of freedom, (6) don't deceive, (7) don't cheat, (8) keep your promises, (9) obey the law, and (10) do your role-related duty. Not every violation of these rules leads to suffering, but it is likely that others would suffer if these rules were not generally followed. For example, it might not cause anyone to suffer if I run a stoplight at 3 A.M. at a deserted intersection (notice how the justification for my action—"late at night, no one around"—is inherent in my description), but others would certainly suffer if people generally disregarded the laws concerning traffic

lights. Lacking justification for an exception, everyone should always act in accordance with the moral rules.

Morality and Mass Communication

Being an ethical practitioner means being committed to acting in a way that doesn't cause others to suffer unnecessarily. Practitioners can act on that commitment by following these steps:

Step One: Identify Your Professional Duty

You don't know whether you are acting in accordance with a moral rule (like "Do your duty") if you don't know what it includes. The professional duty is a short statement of what separates one occupation from others. It captures the essence of what it means to be doing this particular job in society, taking nothing else into account.

The formulations of duty I have suggested below are offered as the starting place for discussion. Each practitioner and each student should consider and discuss with colleagues the statement of professional duty.

1. *Advertisers* have a duty, to the best of their ability, to promote their client's products or services to the targeted audience.
2. *Entertainers* have a duty, to the best of their ability, to present programming and products that target groups find enjoyable.
3. *News representatives* have a duty, to the best of their ability, to gather and present people with accurate information that citizens need to maintain a self-governing society.
4. *Public relations specialists* have a duty, to the best of their ability, to promote favorable

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relationships between their client and the targeted audience.

In each case, “to the best of their ability” is inserted to make it clear that one’s duty is *do-able*. Even if real-life practitioners are hampered by their limitations, it is important both within the profession and by lay audiences as well to understand what the practitioner is attempting to do.

Step Two: Follow the Rule “Do Your Duty” Within the Context of the Moral Rules

Doing one’s duty doesn’t excuse violations of the other moral rules. Lacking justification, it is not acceptable for journalists to break the law as they gather and present the news, for advertisers to promote a product that results in users being disabled or killed, for entertainers to use material that causes individuals pain, for public relations practitioners to lie to journalists on behalf of their client. These are all blatant and obvious instances of practices that would be immoral unless there was good reason for doing them. However, interesting ethical problems arise when people are undecided as to whether a certain action violates moral rules (causes a person to suffer) or when they try to determine whether a recognized violation is justified.

For example, a newspaper publishes a story about tax loopholes used by public officials. Because of the story, legislation is passed that closes the loopholes, and the mayor is forced to pay more taxes. The mayor and his or her family are hurt by the story and resulting action. Did the story cause them to suffer pain (Violation of Moral Rule #2)? Some might argue that the mayor would not have been harmed in this way without the story, but it doesn’t follow that the story was the cause of the pain.

By way of analogy, consider what happens when you get the last table at a restaurant when the noontime rush is just beginning. People who come in after you cannot get a table; per-

haps, because of limited time for lunch, they have to forgo the pleasure of eating at that restaurant that day. Did your actions deprive them of pleasure? Perhaps. Are you morally blameworthy for causing them to suffer (Violation of Moral Rule #4)? Of course not, unless you violated another moral rule like cheating or deceiving someone to get the table. So, the difficult question for media practitioners (and for other professionals) is in determining under what conditions they are morally blameworthy for the suffering of others.

Step Three: Determine What Kinds of Actions Count as Moral Rule Violations for the Profession

Many of the issues discussed in the scholarly media literature relate to moral rule violations, but since they are not discussed in that language, it’s sometimes hard to get a handle on what the ethical problem might be and what needs to be addressed in dealing with it. Here are some of the major ethical issues for media specialists presented in a way that clarifies the morally relevant questions.

Advertising

Special Audiences: Some audiences deserve special consideration—children, for instance. Lacking experiential filters, children are especially vulnerable to advertising messages. Should advertising surrounding children’s television shows therefore be limited? Does the advertiser deprive children (or their parents) of freedom by creating need and desire that would not otherwise be there?

Special Products: Should products that are harmful if used as intended be advertised? Tobacco products and alcoholic beverages are the types of products most often cited in this ethical dilemma. Within moral rules talk, one might argue that by creating a desire for the product that might otherwise not be present, the advertiser is at least partly to blame for the pain

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suffered by individuals who are swayed by the advertisement to use that product.

Deception: Everyone knows that, lacking justification, it's wrong to deceive people. But what counts as deception in the advertising business, which is based, at least in part, on illusion and fantasy? "Want love? Get Close-Up" proclaimed a singer in a toothpaste commercial from years back. No one would argue that this is deceptive, but it's equally hard to argue against the misleading nature of the connection. The advertiser wants members of the audience to connect a desire for intimacy with using a certain brand of toothpaste.

This connection is far-fetched and unlikely to fool many people. But how many people hear the claim, "the best that money can buy," and confuse that to mean "better than any of the others"? Should advertisers refrain from leading members of the audience to wrong conclusions?

Entertainment

Unintended Messages: It's undeniable that we learn through being entertained. Well over half of a newspaper's nonadvertising column inches are devoted to non-news items—feature stories that give us our villains and heroes, in-depth issue stories that help us understand the plight of disenfranchised groups. We watch to see how our favorite sit-com characters deal with child abuse, extramarital flirtations, and catastrophic illness.

Do the decision-makers in entertainment media have an obligation to be concerned about the consequences of unintended messages? The answer to that depends partly on whether these decision-makers can be considered a cause of suffering as a consequence of the messages carried in entertainment media. For example, are these professionals morally responsible if children believe, after watching Saturday morning cartoons, that violence is acceptable if the result is a good end?

Morally Offensive Material: Does the presentation of offensive material cause individuals pain? if so, then this moral rule violation needs justification; something beyond, "well, other people don't mind." But, the associated question raises a new dimension.

Does society have a right to censor expressions of entertainment or art? Doing so certainly interferes with the freedom of those who wish to make such expressions. Depriving someone of freedom is a moral rule violation. It needs to be justified.

If the entertainers are morally blameworthy for individuals' pain and censors are morally blameworthy for depriving the entertainers of their freedom, then we have a conflict between two moral rules: the moral rule against causing individuals pain and the moral rule against depriving people of freedom.

This is the kind of conflict that we have a lot of practice in resolving. With some kinds of cases, we have decided, as a society, that it's better to deprive people of freedom than to deal with the likelihood that a particular kind of expression of freedom will result in individuals' death, disability, or pain. In other cases, like editorial commentary, we have decided, as a society, that it's better to allow the individuals who are the targets of commentary to suffer than to deprive commentators of the freedom to express themselves.

News Media

The whole truth? The fact that news media ought to give people information that they need to govern themselves does not imply that news media ought to supply everything that reporters find out. On a tightly researched story, reporters will include only about 10 percent of the material that they uncover. Most of the material ends up on the electronic equivalent of the cutting room floor because it turns out not to be relevant to the story being told.

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But other material, such as a community leader's sexual preference or the stolen answer key to a statewide examination, is tempting to publish because many members of the audience would like to know that information. Yet publishing it may violate moral rules. Pulling a gay notable from the closet by way of a news story will undoubtedly cause that person pain, and publishing the answer key to a statewide exam prior to the testing date will cause a variety of people a variety of problems, but it doesn't follow that the news organization has acted unethically.

Some people have argued that it is wrong to attribute moral blame to the "messenger." Within this understanding, it is no more wrong for the news organization to publish such information than it is for someone to take the last available table at a restaurant. It is consistent for news organizations to escape responsibility for the consequences of their negative stories only if they refrain from taking credit for the effects of their positive stories. They can't take credit for publishing if they aren't willing to take blame as well.

Relationships with sources: What does a promise of confidentiality mean? Breaking a promise violates a moral rule, but is it justified if the source has lied or, from behind the shield of confidentiality, charges that someone else has leaked that information?

Reporters get more information from sources that like them than from sources who don't, so what's wrong with developing a close friendship or intimate relationship with one's source? Does it cause someone pain to be used in this way?

On the other hand, if a source is not going to be forthcoming with information, is it justified for a journalist to act deceptively? When is going undercover or lying about what is already known a justified violation of the moral rule "Do not deceive"?

Public Relations

Loyalty: The duty of public relations practitioners is to promote their clients' causes, but doing so can conflict with other moral rules. What should a public relations person do when asked directly by a journalist (or by a relative) if the company for which he or she works is planning to lay off workers? The response, "I can't answer that," will be assumed to mean "Yes." "No" may be a direct lie. Furthermore it is impracticable to the company not to tell him or her such information prior to public dissemination since the public relations practitioner is a vital part of the team that decides *how* to distribute such information.

Consequences: Like people who work in entertainment and advertising, public relations practitioners must consider the consequences of what they promote. If the services they promote cause harm—financial, emotional, or physical—they cannot deny responsibility on the basis that they were only following directions.

The answers to these questions lie not in appeal to law and regulation, but in interpretation of the moral rules and understanding of what makes an exception to the rule justifiable.

Law cannot provide the answer to questions of ethics. Law tells us not to lie to the IRS, but it is ethics that tells us not to deceive a friend.

Media are in a special role in that practitioners spread their understandings and misunderstandings of ethics throughout the public realm. They have the power to shape the public discussion of ethics, they can model how to discuss moral questions, and they can also model when and how to publicly justify making exceptions to the moral rules.

Note

1. B. Gert, *Morality, A New Justification for the Moral Rules* (New York: Oxford, 1989).