

Chapter 90

Ethics, Media, and Reasoning: Systems and Applications

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ABSTRACT

Due to the rapidly changing norms and constant developments in technology, media and communication educators and practitioners are expected to (re)evaluate the functioning of ethics and reasoning in this field. This chapter discusses the relationship between ethics, reasoning, and the media, and the integral role of ethical reasoning education for communication and media professionals. Ethical systems and theories are discussed to inform the debate on the importance of ethics and reasoning education. Globalization and the growing interconnectivity of global media systems are presented, providing insight on how different media systems function around the world. The large impact that the media have on society necessitates the possession of rational and ethical skills; thus, the connection between reasoning and ethics is explained.

INTRODUCTION

Modern societies rely heavily on governance and infrastructure to dictate how people and groups function within this social system. These societies are primarily clusters of individuals, groups, and institutions working and living together and sharing several agreed-upon norms, cultural practices, and social values. Individuals continue to create new tools and processes for living, functioning, and developing that impact how people behave and interact. New technologies foster an environment of mass information sharing and gathering, which is changing how people exchange materials and knowledge. Communication and media

industries are greatly impacted by technological advancements; they are granted new opportunities and face different challenges. However, as communication and media industries continue to dominate public and private spaces, modern societies are faced with new issues pertaining to the conduct of these highly pervasive entities. In this, the question of ethics and sound decision-making becomes paramount.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss issues pertaining to ethics in this new environment and explain the importance of educating media professionals on ethical conduct. It discusses ethical theories and systems relevant to the teaching and practice of reasoning and ethics in the media.

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Being that media systems are becoming globalized, new ethical questions are raised, forcing frequent monitoring and evaluation of ethical issues. Codes of ethics are considered important tools in this task, as they provide principles and guidelines to individuals and organizations facing ethical qualms. Through awareness fostered by education, media professionals can be equipped with the knowledge and tools needed for ethical decision-making.

ETHICS THEORIES AND SYSTEMS

Understanding the scope of ethics requires an examination of existing definitions pertaining to this topic. However, defining ethics is not an easy task, as various methods for explaining and outlining this term exist. Despite varying definitions, the genealogy of the term “ethics” is considered an accurate point of departure in this endeavor. According to Larry Leslie (2000), the word “ethics” hails from the Greek word “ethos,” which means “character.” These origins lead us to understand that one’s character, and the daily-life values attached to it, ultimately commands one’s ethical behavior. Thus, Leslie provides this concise definition: “Ethics are moral principles for living and making decisions” (2000, p. 16). Morality is closely linked to ethics. It is derived from the Latin “moralis,” meaning “customs and manners” (Leslie, 2000). While popular usage of ethics and morality can be synonymous, most philosophers deem them dissimilar. Ethics refers to the individual’s thinking and conduct in matters of right and wrong, while morality pertains to a society’s set of beliefs and customs concerning proper conduct (Markel, 2001). Successful *ethical* decision-making benefits from a set of *moral* beliefs that strives to serve both the individual and the society. Ethical behavior is defined as an accepted or preferred and agreed-upon practice (Hanson, 2002).

Philosophy is the scholarly discipline under which ethics falls, containing many approaches, subcategories, and perspectives (Eid, 2008). The dominant paradigm in ethics has traditionally been ethical rationalism: “through reason the human species is distinctive and through rationality moral canons are legitimate” (Christians, 2005, p. 3). Therefore, Christians (2005) explains, the conventions of particular societies are independent of timeless moral truths that are rooted in human nature; however, the concept of a common morality and the idea of “the good life” might not translate across all cultures. Despite the potential for varying views between cultures pertaining to what is ethical and what is not, ethical principles are ultimately based on what is deemed proper conduct, or “doing the right thing.” For instance, when we face a decision that requires us to enact an outcome that may or may not hurt another person, we turn to ethical principles to decide on the best option.

Ultimately, defining ethics results in the investigation of its various incarnations (Eid, 2008). Within the context of this chapter, it is deemed important to identify whether or not ethical theories guiding the field of communication exist. According to Donald Wright (1996), there are; he divides them into two types: classical ethical theory and moral reasoning theories. Classical ethical theory understands ethical obligation in two different ways: teleological and deontological. “*Teleological ethics* underscores the consequences of an act or decision, whereas *deontological ethics* emphasizes the nature of an act or decision” (Wright, 1996, p. 525). Moral reasoning theories are based on the shared values of freedom, justice, and wisdom. Wright (1996) explains four essential requirements that must be met prior to making ethical judgment. First, society must come to an agreement on moral conduct standards; second, these guidelines should be based on experience and reason; third, justice should be sought by a system of ethics; and finally, an ethical system should be rooted primarily in freedom of choice.

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