ETHICS FOR A DIGITAL ERA

DENI ELLIOTT AND EDWARD H. SPENCE

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Ethics for a Digital Era

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Deni Elliott

Edward H. Spence

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Deni Elliott: To my mom who raised me brave enough to seek the truth, confident enough to speak my truth, and open minded enough to learn from the truth of others.

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Introduction

Writing a book on digital journalism ethics that serves the needs of a twenty-first-century audience and addresses information communication technologies (ICTs) is as complicated as the topic itself. We know that technology will leap forward between the time this book goes to the publisher and when it becomes available to audience members. Even with annual electronic updates, this book will always be at least one step behind the newest device, app, or trending social media site. However, we also know that the fundamental ethical issues that concern journalists and citizens today, such as practices that impact on the truth, reliability, and trustworthiness of communicating information, will apply regardless of technological change. Citizens' need for accuracy will remain as important as it is at present.

Audience members, particularly those born after 1980, are used to embracing the newest communication device, technique, trending site, or story and then moving on when better technology comes along. How we communicate now can change as quickly as the content that we communicate. Today's young adults, who were exposed to communication technologies from the beginning, learned from their early days how to adapt to new devices with new ways to navigate. The logic of software architecture was learned by these users as intuitively as how to crawl and

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take first steps. As we have written an electronic book discussing electronic matters, we generally refer to those reading this book as *users*.

The good news about the study of ethics is that thinking about how people should act in regard to each other and how they should use power in a judicious way predates any technology. Most of the important concepts, issues, and processes for analysis have been part of human practice since our ancestors began living in communal groups. The basic formula for reasoning through ethical issues has been part of Western culture for more than 2,000 years. The ancient Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, articulated some basic principles for ethics in private, public, and professional life that have been reinterpreted over the years but that form the basic concepts and principles for the analysis that we use through this day. Today, we call the field of study of how ordinary people should make choices about how to act in the world **practical ethics**. Those basic concepts include the following:

1. Everyone wishes to avoid basic harms like pain, death, and disability for themselves and for those whom they care about;
2. If it is irrational to want to be caused a certain harm in a certain circumstance—that is, there is no good reason for someone wanting to be caused that harm—it is unethical to cause that harm to any other human being;
3. Everyone should be treated justly—they should get what they have a legal right to, what they have an ethical right to, what they deserve, and what they have been promised, and they should not be deprived of what others can get unless there is an ethically relevant justification;
4. People are ethically required to fulfill their role-related responsibilities and to do that without causing unjustified harm to anyone;
5. While people should strive to act in ethically ideal ways by promoting the good and giving extra consideration and care for the most vulnerable, it is ethically required that they do their jobs and do not cause unjustified harm. It is praiseworthy if they act in ethically ideal ways. They are blameworthy if they have failed to meet ethical requirements.

Mass communication ethics, of which digital journalism ethics is a part, has been considered at least since the Greek philosopher Plato wrote the dialogue Gorgias (http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/gorgias.html) in 400 BCE. Plato noticed that some people have the ability to communicate ideas to others and persuade others to hold particular beliefs. He argued that people with the power to communicate and persuade have the ethical requirement to use that power in a way that promotes the public good and that helps make individuals better people.

In the digital era, we can interpret this ancient directive to mean that those who have the power to communicate with mass audiences—that would be anyone with an Internet connection—should use that power to promote good in individuals and community. As we will explore in this book, open and broad communication of ideas generally promotes the good, as compared with the opposite choice of restricting communication. We discuss in this book what it means to communicate in an ethical and responsible manner.

Journalism, at its essence, is the distribution of information so that citizens can make informed and educated decisions for self-governance. Journalism tells users what they need to know and think about if they are going to participate in creating a good community or even simply in living their own lives effectively. Acting corruptly may be effective for certain individuals, and engaging in corruption might advance their financial interests, but it does not benefit society on the whole. That is why corruption is both illegal and unethical. Open communication that leads to transparency and accountability allows for corruption to be detected and disclosed.

The ethics of journalism and the ethics of digital communication more generally, both in the creation and consumption of journalism, serve as the core of *Ethics for a Digital Era*. It is an exciting time to think about journalism ethics and the ethics of digital communication more broadly. The Internet has opened the practice of journalism to everyone with access. There is no topic or opinion or discussion unreachable for the curious user. Every person reading this material electronically literally has the power to change the world. This has resulted in a *convergence* between journalism ethics and communication ethics more

broadly, which extends well beyond the traditional boundaries of journalism as previously conceived and practiced. Users of information can also now be creators and communicators of information. Within a different use of the concept of "convergence," Wikileaks (https://wikileaks.org/) is a prime example of such a convergence of digital information, a convergence to which we refer in this book, as a convergence of the communication of information between the 4th Estates (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth_Estate) and 5th Estates (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fifth_Estate).

Writing about ethics is always an exercise of putting old wine in new bottles. The dilemmas that signal the need to think through ethical questions may change as new technological devices are introduced, but the process of human reasoning and the basic ethical responsibilities of competent, rational adults, whom we will refer to as *moral agents*, remains constant.

Ethics for a Digital Era: Responsible Journalism for Producers and Users must straddle the physical world and the virtual world so that it is useful across platforms. The book contains "old style" in-text citations and a reference list at the end of each chapter for readers who would like to follow up using that method. It also has live hyperlinks for users who are renting or buying this as an e-book and who wish to click back to source additional online material. *Ethics for a Digital Era*, like most contemporary mass communication, must work as a static product but must also be easy to update electronically as new cases, technology, and ideas become available.

We assume that many of this book's users are *digital natives*, people who have grown up comfortably living with one foot in the physical world and the other in the virtual world. Google is older than those who were first-time-in-college at the time of this book's publication. These students have always known a wireless world. Our goal is not to answer all of the ethical questions for journalism in a digital era. Rather, we hope to help users understand ethically relevant aspects of how the practice and products of journalism and the convergent digital media more broadly have changed in the move to the digital era. We provide a method for analyzing issues and demonstrate its use. The questions for reflection at the end of each chapter help users think how they might

further apply the topics covered in each chapter. We hope to provide the tools to help users analyze ethical issues in digital journalism and the digital convergent media more generally, wherever they emerge, and we hope to motivate users to use their communication skills to create a better world.

Before proceeding to describe and explain the content of this book a note on *methodology*. This book comprises *three* interrelated components: *ethical and epistemic theory; application of the theory* to digital communication *practices*; and illustration of how the theory applies to those practices by reference to *case studies*. The case studies have been chosen *diachronically* (across time) *rather* than *synchronically* (in the present time) on the basis of important *general types* of illustrative cases. This is for two main reasons.

One reason is to avoid the "currency trap": that is, that only what happens in the present time is important or relevant. That of course is plainly false as that would make most of our knowledge such as for example, Einstein's Theory of Relativity, and other great scientific inventions and discoveries, irrelevant. Some of the historical case studies referred to in this book are significant because of their impact in shaping the ethics of journalism and the ethics digital communication more broadly, especially with regard the media convergence that we discuss in Chapter 6 and elsewhere in this book.

The second reason is to provide a *diachronic* spread of case studies that span the development of journalism and digital communication ethics across time, with an emphasis on *types* of significant cases rather than *tokens* or instances of those types of cases. Our primary purpose for this is to show how the theoretical approach developed in this book, the Dual Obligation Information Theory (DOIT) introduced in Chapter 5, can apply generally to all such cases both now and in the future. To use a metaphor, our hope is to teach our readers the method for catching fish themselves rather than providing them with the caught fish. We expect readers to do some work on their own to connect cases with our arguments of theory and practice and to find other cases that exemplify the concepts explored.

This brings us to two further methodological design features of this book. The first has to do with our choice of *Wikipedia* as a primary

source for providing links to further information and readings on relevant topics throughout the book; the second methodological feature has to do with the section on *Questions for Reflection* that we have provided at the end of each chapter of this book.

First, the choice of Wikipedia:

Producing an electronic book with live links is a challenge. Blogs disappear. Content is changed without notice. Archives available today are not available tomorrow. Firewalls block users from accessing primary sources that we used in the process of researching this book. Therefore, many of our hyperlinks take readers to Wikipedia entries. We are confident that this site will be always available and always up-to-date. Wikipedia is not the ultimate research tool, but is a good introduction to a topic that always has a list of vetted sources for further exploration.

When Web 2.0 was in its infancy, many scholars did not consider Wikipedia a credible source as they equated Wikipedia with a physical encyclopedia, but one with no expert control. Even the best researched physical encyclopedias were not considered appropriate sources for scholars or for college students to use as authoritative sources, because encyclopedias simply summarized topics rather than providing primary source material. By analogy, Wikipedia was a secondary, rather than a primary, source. Crowdsourcing was considered to be no substitute for "the truth."

In the years since the 2001 creation of Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia), scholars and users have come to recognize that this web site is not a bad, virtual world imitation of a physical encyclopedia. In a 2016 interview on the NPR radio program, On Being (http://www.onbeing.org/program/jimmy-wales-the-sum-of-all-human-knowledge/transcript/8924#main_content).), Wikipedia co-founder Jimmy Wales said that, Wikipedia could boast "15 billion page views a month, 7,000 new articles every day, 80,000 unpaid volunteers worldwide."

Rather than providing a poor model of a twentieth-century encyclopedia, Wikipedia entries are fact-based and evidence-backed and directly point the user to primary sources. Wikipedia has emerged as a model for sharing knowledge through Internet-based democratic action. The site is a model for democracy in three ways:

1. Open access. Wikipedia's mission statement is, "Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge." Access to information is as free as access to the air we breathe in the physical world. The goal is to free information from governmental censorship or corporate control.
2. Difficult dialogues. The structural process of Wikipedia reflects the best of democracy without tyranny of the majority. Every user has the power to create and edit entries on the site. Each creation and edit is reviewed by others. Controversy or disagreement about edits results in dialogue with the shared goal of publishing accurate information. Different perspectives on the same topic can comfortably appear together. Elected administrators have the power to lock sites or block particular users, but all administrative actions are public. Arbitration committees provide binding decisions, including blocking people on both sides of a controversy from contributing to a page.
3. Seeking truth. Crowdsourcing is not equivalent to everyone's opinion being equal. Crowdsourcing is way of removing statements of purported fact from the personality of the provider. Others verify the truth of statements or provide evidence to their falsity. The sources upon which statements depend are available at the end of each article.

Second, the choice of Questions for Reflection:

The primary reason for setting questions for reflection is to strongly encourage the readers to reflect for themselves on the relevant ethical and epistemic principles, their application to the relevant issues and practices and the analysis and evaluation of those issues and practices by reference to illustrative case studies that the readers are also invited to search and discover for themselves. As Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher would say, ethical learning, in this case, digital ethics as it applies to the media, comes through individual and group *reflective practice* and not just through the reading of articles and books on the topic. This book therefore encourages constructive *self-learning* through

self- reflection as an effective and efficient way for becoming a reflective media practitioner.

Ethics for a Digital Era is divided into three parts. *Part One: From Analog to Digital News* which presents the changes related to the move from one-way to interactive mass communication in which users can be both producer and consumer of news. Chapter 1 addresses the paradigm shift that occurred through the technologically induced communication revolution of the latter twentieth century. Chapter 2 describes how legacy news media have adapted to producing news from a web-based platform. Chapter 3 discusses how the web-based platform has created new questions for copyright and how news aggregation has changed news organizations' ability to protect their intellectual property. Chapter 4 argues that the new opportunities that citizens have for accessing information implies a new level of responsibility for them to engage in active citizenship.

Part Two: Thinking Through Ethical Issues in Digital Journalism and Digital Communication more broadly applies a process of normative decision-making to some of the most important issues arising in digital communication in its convergent form that now combines traditional modes of media communication, such as journalism, with new forms of communicating information by non-professional communicators, through the use of blogs, tweets, and other non-traditional communication platforms.

Chapter 5 will show that information has a dual normative structure that commits all disseminators of information to both epistemological (those that relate to knowledge) and ethical norms (those that relate to moral behavior) that are in principle universal and thus global in application. Based on this dual normative characterization of information, the chapter will seek to demonstrate that: information and, specifically, digital information on the Internet, as a process and product of communication, has an inherent normative structure that commits its producers, disseminators, communicators, and users, everyone in fact that deals with information, to certain mandatory epistemological and ethical commitments; and the negligent or purposeful abuse of information in violation of these commitments is also a violation of universal rights

to freedom and well-being to which all agents are entitled by virtue of being agents (by agent we mean any person engaged in any purposive activity, such as taking a walk, searching the Internet, writing an essay, etc.,). Chapter 6 examines the phenomenon of converging physical-world static news products with the process-oriented production of web-based news, as well as the broader convergence of information between that produced by professional communicators and non-professional communicators of information. These days, digital information can be created, accessed, disseminated, and used by anyone, anytime, anywhere—worldwide. This change challenges the traditional role and legitimacy of legacy news organizations as the primary and authoritative source of news. This is especially so on matters of public interest. The new world of citizen journalists ranges from the Twitterati (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=twitterati) to the WikiLeaks (https://wikileaks.org/index.en.html) founder Julian Assange (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/julian_assange).

The primary aim of this chapter is to present a conceptual framework that shows how to examine and evaluate the ongoing transformations wrought by the digitalization of journalism and expansion of its communicators. Specifically, we will seek to show how this conceptual framework allows for the examination and evaluation of the ethics of the ongoing convergence of old and new media at the fundamental level of the *ethics of information*. We will show how this model can be operationalized to evaluate the impact of this convergence and its implications for the social well-being (*the good life*) of individuals and society.

Chapter 7 looks at the ethical issues related to individuals' control over access to themselves or their information. Chapter 8 considers the ethics of information-gathering in the digital era along with what information news providers have a responsibility to publish. Sometimes withholding information is deceptive; sometimes it is not. Chapter 9 examines and explores the presence of corruption in the media by reference to Plato's Myth of Gyges (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ring_of_Gyges), as this has contemporary significance and relevance in explaining corruption in the media. The primary objective of this chapter is to identify and categorize the different types of media corruption, identify

the different ways in which these are caused, and describe the contexts in which they manifest in current physical and virtual media environments and practices.

Part Three: Using the Virtual World to Create a Better Physical World encourages users to bridge their own thinking between the virtual and physical worlds of information and its communication. The previous chapters in the two previous sections focused primarily on identifying and analyzing current practices in digital communication and their ethical implications, and how to prevent or at least minimize unethical practices in digital journalism and digital media communication more broadly. By extension, the chapters in this final section, focus on ethical thinking and practices that not merely prevent unethical conduct, but proactively promote ethical thinking and practice that constitutes moreover, wise thinking and practice in digital media communication.

Chapter 10 investigates the differences between information, knowledge, and wisdom, with the aim examining the significance of those concepts and their relevance for digital media communication. The chapter begins with a short *philosophy play* (Spence 2008) that highlights dramatically those differences and their importance for the dissemination of media information that contributes to our well-being, both as individuals and as a society. The chapter examines how the ethical dissemination of information by journalists and other communicators of digital information more generally, requires both knowledge and wisdom in the form of reflection, understanding, and judgment in knowing when and how to apply knowledge for both the professional and public good. Wisdom is essential because it provides practical guidance for how to act for the enhancement of both personal and social well-being.

Chapter 11 shows how the digital world with its exponential increase in transparency and accountability allows for global understanding and justice to a far greater degree than when users were isolated geographically in the physical world.

Part I

From Analog to Digital News

I

A New Paradigm for News

You don't need to understand the meaning of "paradigm shift" to know that that the last half of the twentieth century witnessed a world-wide communication revolution. The change was so profound that it changed what it means for humans to communicate with one another, interpersonally as well as in mass communication.

This chapter describes the *paradigm shift*—the fundamental change in information production, delivery, and consumption—that occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century. This shift has been called the digital communication revolution (http://www.ojcmt.net/articles/23/237.pdf), the third industrial revolution (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_Revolution), the information age (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_Age), and, as we will refer to it in this book, the digital era (http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/digital-era/29024).

The focus of this book is how the creation and consumption of news have changed through this paradigm shift. Examining the changes reveals which practices are mere conventions of this moment in the history of news and which reflect essential values that endure through changes in technology and marketing. By the end of this chapter, users should be able to explain the major ways that the paradigm shift has affected contemporary digital journalism and be able to describe the journalistic values that have transcended paradigm shifts. Users should

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