

ethical space

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PAPERS

- The 'morally defensible' journalist: Shedding 'performance' and managing an ethic of empathy within personal trauma narrative – by Sue Joseph
- A Gandhian conundrum: The ethical dilemma in the Indian sustainability discourse – by Prithi Nambiar
- Achieving the goal of a global computing code of ethics through an international-localisation hybrid – by Oliver K. Burmeister
- Fit to post but not fit to print: Channel consistency and virtue ethics for legacy print journalism organisations – by Chris Roberts

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Aims and scope

Communication ethics is a discipline that supports communication practitioners by offering tools and analyses for the understanding of ethical issues. Moreover, the speed of change in the dynamic information environment presents new challenges, especially for communication practitioners.

Ethics used to be a specialist subject situated within schools of philosophy. Today it is viewed as a language and systematic thought process available to everyone. It encompasses issues of care and trust, social responsibility and environmental concern and identifies the values necessary to balance the demands of performance today with responsibilities tomorrow.

For busy professionals, CE is a powerful learning and teaching approach that encourages analysis and engagement with many constituencies, enhancing relationships through open-thinking. It can be used to improve organization performance as well as to protect individual well-being.

Submissions

Papers should be submitted to the Editor via email. Full details on submission – along with detailed notes for authors – are available online in PDF format: www.communication-ethics.net

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Fit to post but not fit to print: Channel consistency and virtue ethics for legacy print journalism organisations

Many legacy print media organisations with web operations often have differing ethical standards between what is printed and what is posted online. This US-focused discussion describes key differing standards, suggests some justifications for the differences but also their potentially deleterious effects, and offers the virtue ethics approach of Aristotle, MacIntyre, and others as a guide for decision-makers at single news organisations serving multiple communication channels.

Keywords: journalism ethics; Aristotle; MacIntyre, virtue ethics; online journalism; credibility

Introduction

Randy Cohen, who wrote 'The ethicist' column in *The New York Times* from 1999 to 2011, has some questions in his book, *Be good: How to navigate the ethics of everything*, about his former employer's practice of not printing¹ unsigned letters to the editor but allowing anonymous online posts: '[S]hould newspapers continue to post unsigned comments? Which is to ask: what codes of etiquette and ethics should govern a comments section?' (Cohen 2012). He called the inconsistency 'less a planned policy than a clash' between print and web traditions (ibid: 69), arguing that 'most online exchanges can and should operate unmasked' (ibid: 73). As this paper will show, it is among many channel-based ethical inconsistencies among legacy print-focused news organisations now with online operations.

The internet has forever changed the gatekeeping role of newspapers, as mass media have transformed from top-down dissemination of information into today's 'inherently nonlinear' network where 'information flows not only through journalists but also, continuously, around them' (Singer 2010). Online's immediacy, the web's multi-platform communication abilities, and the internet's economic disruption have led most legacy print publications to migrate into digital-only, digital-and, or digital-first operations in which a print edition often is not the only priority (Gade 2011).

A look at content created by legacy news organisations, as well as academic research and convergence journalism textbooks, reveal that those organisations often use non-moral reasoning when creating online-only content. Less clear, however, even as news organisations originally known for their print publications are deep into their second decade of web publishing, are ethical reasons underlying differences between print and online publication. Some traditional news organisations have different gatekeeping standards – and therefore, different ethical standards, whether or not those standards are planned, fully understood, or clearly delineated – when deciding that some news messages fit for their websites are not fit to print.

This paper discusses the standards by which legacy news organisations primarily in the United States differentiate among channels when making gatekeeping decisions. It also explores the question of when, if ever, news organisations can justify publishing content for one channel that it would not publish in another. It places a particular emphasis on moral virtue defined by the Nicomachean ethics of Aristotle, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others who discuss a moral excellence based more on habits than whether an individual specific act is morally suspect or praiseworthy. It hopes to advance scholarship as suggested by Shoemaker and Vos, who said gatekeeping research should consider how communication routines differ among communicators and channels, and how 'the differing goals of these organizations affect inputs and outputs' of message selection and shaping (2009: 135). It also is in keeping with the call of Joseph and Boczkowski for a 'practice-based perspective to complement existing media ethics scholarship' (2012: 16).

Print journalism ethics migrate online

Even before the World Wide Web emerged in the early 1990s, newspaper executives realised