CONTEMPORARY MEDIA ETHICS


DEDICATIONS

Mitchell Land: To my virtuous and beautiful wife, Vivian Lea,
our four children, Eyon, Mae Beth, Austin and Andrew,
and our nineteen grandchildren for their unconditional love and exemplary lives.

Koji Fuse: To my late father, Isamu Fuse, and my mother, Sachiko Fuse,
for their unconditional love and sacrifice;
as well as to my son, David Yuki Fuse,
for his innocent love, noise, and smile. I love him so much.

Bill Hornaday: To my late mother, Karen J. Hornaday,
who lifted four children from poverty as a single mother,
served God and his children as a registered nurse,
and inspired in me curiosity, virtue, and perseverance.
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Some may wonder why the academy needs yet another book on media ethics. In response, we believe this second edition of *Contemporary Media Ethics* offers an additional set of tools for ethics analysis: diverse non-utilitarian and non-Western philosophies for analyzing U.S. or U.S.-related cases. The majority of ethics texts tend to presuppose the universality and supremacy of Western normative ethical theories, such as Aristotelian virtue ethics, Kantian deontological ethics, and Benthamian and Millian utilitarianism. This book attempts to address the critique that portrays such cross-cultural efforts as “far-fetched” as if everything non-Western, including, Confucianism, Islam, or Buddhism, is merely exotic or trivial in intellectual scope and practical application in the West. The reality is that no knowledge was universal in the beginning, and the subsequent worldwide proliferation of any knowledge depended primarily on international power relations and repeated applications. Therefore, we asked three of the field’s leading scholars—John C. Merrill, Clifford G. Christians, and Mark Fackler—to summarize the foundational concepts that inform moral reasoning in our field. Their chapters set the stage for the rest of the book to move from theory to praxis. Some twenty-eight scholars who bring decades of professional experience to the classroom show how diverse philosophical perspectives can be applied to resolving complex ethical dilemmas in media practice.

This book is organized into four sections. Similar to the first edition, the introductory section is titled “Foundations” and features four chapters that introduce readers to the broader, and often controversial, issues involving the study of ethics in media. These chapters address many of the challenges involved in understanding how to confront and resolve ethical dilemmas as theory moves into practice toward achieving an optimal resolution.

Co-editors Mitchell Land and Koji Fuse present in Chapter 1 the theoretical background that forms the basis of this second edition of *Contemporary Media Ethics*. Following the Point-of-Decision Pyramid Model introduced in the first edition, this revision substitutes communitarianism in most of the case analyses with non-utilitarian approaches, with an emphasis on cross-cultural application of non-Western philosophies within an increasingly global media environment. The first edition applied the principles of truth, humaneness, justice, freedom (or liberty), and stewardship—standards of right and wrong that are recognized worldwide. This chapter explains why the second edition adds two more guideposts to the analysis: harmony and diversity.
In Chapter 2, which is one of his final published works, the late John C. Merrill offers a tour of the confusing and often-tangled concepts that can cloud one’s sense of whether he or she acts ethically at all. Merrill takes a particularly critical, perhaps even cynical, view that the various terms and labels embraced by ethics-based approaches often serve as much to inhibit as to promote a common understanding. Do people truly know if the actions they take are ethical? Merrill contends they do not—at least not for certain. Chapter 3 finds Clifford G. Christians arguing the merits that communitarianism, an approach often criticized by Merrill, offers toward developing systems of media ethics. Among his observations, Christians emphasizes that communitarianism is more a social philosophy than a standalone ethical system, yet plays a role in many of the applied approaches and ideas discussed in this book such as an ethics of care, the Confucian concept of ren (humanity), and the African worldview of ubuntu, or “humanity toward others.” In Chapter 4, Mark Fackler takes a broad look at how major religions—the Judeo-Christian traditions, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam—and a philosophy that acts as a religion (Daoism)—influence communication ethics worldwide.

The book’s second section contains eight case studies of ethical dilemmas selected from the print and broadcast news environments. Each chapter introduces a non-utilitarian philosophical framework to contrast with the dominant utilitarian view as it follows the Point-of-Decision Pyramid Model.

In Chapter 5, co-editor Bill W. Hornaday examines the ethical and legal dangers that arose when sports broadcasting giant ESPN acted more in its own interests—largely in parallel to a communitarian approach—than its audience’s interests during its coverage of the 2010 Valero Alamo Bowl. He also discusses why sports journalists and broadcasters are particularly vulnerable to such issues. Reasons include the “blurring” of objective and subjective reporting of events that often simultaneously serve as news and entertainment, the increased popularity and public importance of sports, the narrative tradition of sports journalism, and the cozy relationships that can form among sports journalists, coaches, and players.

James E. Mueller applies a feminist ethics of care in Chapter 6 to Newsweek magazine’s coverage of former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin in November 2009. The publication’s leggy photographic treatment of the then-Alaska governor—who once worked as a sportscaster and a sports reporter for a small newspaper—seemed to focus “on anything but Palin’s political philosophy.” Among other points, Mueller contends that adherence to virtues such as harmony and humaneness, stressed within an ethics of care, would have
discouraged material that would dehumanize or objectify Palin rather than focus on qualities tangible to the story at hand—in this case, Palin’s political acumen.

In Chapter 7, Haydar Badawi Sadig offers an Islamic perspective on the repeated use of a racial slur by talk-show host Laura Schlessinger on August 10, 2010, which ultimately led to her leaving terrestrial radio. Sadig contends that what many audiences—and Schlessinger herself—hail as “freedom of expression” falls short of “genuine freedom” when it injures human dignity. He holds that such discourse, often sensational in nature and driven by commercial motives, trivializes the true spirit of democracy, while Islamic qualities such as justice, equality, and liberty could be applied in support of democratic ideals.

Lynne Edwards, Angela M. Corbo, and April Kontostathis focus in Chapter 8 on one of the more profound media ethics breaches of the past decade—the conduct of NBC’s Dateline news program concerning its popular To Catch a Predator series. Amid the multiple issues that arose after one of the show’s targets—an assistant district attorney—committed suicide when police entered his Texas home, the authors apply an ethical approach based on the “philosophic sagacity” of Kenyan philosopher Henry Odera Oruka. In this case, such an approach would seek greater dialogue with community and civic leaders, and prompt a more critical discussion of Dateline’s relationship with police and special-interest groups such as Perverted Justice, which lured potential sex offenders into unwitting neighborhoods.

An ethics-of-care lens is used by Gary R. Hicks in Chapter 9 to examine coverage of stigmatized populations—in this case those who care for and suffer from mental illness. Among the questions this case study poses is whether a departure from standard newsgathering techniques—and a greater consideration for unique communities—promotes better journalism, or works more to compromise journalists’ obligation to serve a broader society.

In Chapter 10, Rick Kenney and Kimiko Akita outline the rumor, innuendo, and speculation that surfaced in news reports about the gender of South African runner Caster Semenya during her rise to international prominence. Amid issues centered on truth telling, accuracy, and the disclosure of one’s private information, the authors explore the advantages of applying a philosophy of mutuality and trust proposed by Japanese ethicist Tetsuro Watsuji.

James Edwin Mahon explains in Chapter 11 how a closer adherence to virtue ethics, a character-based approach with origins in ancient Greece, might have dissuaded a magazine editor from lying to lobbying firms to uncover how they serve on behalf of foreign governments—some ruled by dictators with some of the world’s worst human-rights records. While the editor contends that he could not have gotten the story any other way, and that he acted under
established ethical guidelines, a nagging question remains: When such tactics are employed, whose credibility deserves more scrutiny—the journalist or the subject of the story?

In Chapter 12, Sokthan Yeng and Mark Grabowski look at another sports-themed story, the sex scandal surrounding golf superstar Tiger Woods. They examine how media outlets—including Woods’ hometown newspaper, the Orlando Sentinel—frequently relied upon often inaccurate and uncorroborated outside reports, which in the Sentinel’s case apparently violated its own ethics code. The authors explore how aspects of a Buddhist-based approach, perhaps combined with utilitarian qualities, might “serve as a check for the selfishness and frivolity that seems to plague newspapers and individuals alike.”

The book’s third section offers four case studies of ethical dilemmas centered on Internet-based content or issues involving social media. As in the previous section, each chapter contrasts a non-utilitarian philosophical framework with the dominant utilitarian approach, again following the Point-of-Decision Pyramid Model.

In Chapter 13, Jacqueline J. Lambiase and Sarah Maben discuss how a form of cosmopolitanism advocated by philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah may have enabled Amazon.com to take a more focused approach in deciding whether or not to sell a Kindle e-reader book titled The Pedophile’s Guide to Love and Pleasure: A Child-Lover’s Code of Conduct. Jenn Burleson Mackay examines in Chapter 14 a controversy that surrounded the anonymous comments policy of the Collegiate Times, a campus newspaper that serves Virginia Tech University. Through an ethical approach based on facets of John Rawls’ theory of justice—specifically his well-known veil of ignorance and the principles of justice and difference that emerge from it—Mackay asserts that free expression exercised through story comments could co-exist alongside sanctions against those who post racist or other inflammatory remarks that infringe upon another’s rights.

Bradford Owen and Rueyling Chuang explain in Chapter 15 how an approach based on Buddhist ethics might have altered how WikiLeaks editors released portions of the “Afghan War Diary” in 2010. As some of the leaked documents contained the names of Afghan informants who aided NATO forces—making them potential targets for Taliban retaliation—the authors contend that elevating humaneness within a Buddhist-based ethical approach could prevent such harm from taking place, even if it meant delaying the documents’ release until all informants’ names could be redacted. In Chapter 16, Nicole Holland Pearce examines how an ill-fated attempt at blog-post humor by a
The book’s fourth section includes nine case studies involving ethical issues in advertising and public relations. Again, non-utilitarian philosophies are weighed against utilitarian approaches by way of the Point-of-Decision Pyramid Model.

Co-editors Mitchell Land and Koji Fuse, along with Jacqueline J. Lambiase, use the African-based, consensus-building “palaver tree” model in Chapter 17 to demonstrate how the San Francisco Zoo could have responded more responsibly after a fatal tiger attack on Christmas Day in 2007. In Chapter 18, Fuse employs Mohism, an ancient Chinese school of thought, in his analysis of how an Ohio public relations firm and fashion retailer, Coach Inc., exerted undue influence over a course at New York’s Hunter College in which students developed a deceptive campaign centered on a bogus online personality.

Chapter 19 finds Peggy J. Kreshel using dialogic ethics to explore the unconventional tactics used by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals to call attention to its various causes. Kreshel argues that such approaches limit the effectiveness of PETA’s message and that greater consideration of a dialogic philosophy—particularly in an age “in which there is no consensual definition of good”—could improve that effectiveness.

In Chapter 20, Ling-Hui Hsu looks at toymaker Mattel Inc.’s handling of three 2007 recalls involving lead-tainted toys through the Chinese philosophic framework of Yijing, described as the fundamental Chinese theory of reality and creativity. Applied as a public relations philosophy, Yijing emphasizes the ability to spot changes in one’s environment that could spawn potential crises, to take proactive steps to avoid such crises, and to build long-term relations with all of an organization’s key publics—all in the spirit of promoting balance and harmony with the wider world.

T. Randahl Morris draws upon Confucianism in Chapter 21 to explore the tactics used by U.S. researchers who administered two “guerilla polls” in Syria prior to its civil war—and the propriety of publicizing the results by touting the researchers’ ability to “outwit” the totalitarian regime of Bashar al-Assad.

In Chapter 22, Ginny Whitehouse and Lindsay Huffman assess how the Society of Professional Journalists decided the fate of its Helen Thomas Lifetime Achievement Award when its namesake—one of history’s most accomplished White House correspondents—voiced anti-Israeli views and accused Congress and the White House of being “owned by Zionists.” They argue that Judaic principles, when properly balanced against each other, allow for broader and
more wholesome ethical debates, as opposed to discourse that limits debate and promotes a more polarized forum.

Jennifer M. Keller employs ubuntu in Chapter 23 to examine the decision by Royal Caribbean International to dock cruise ships as scheduled at the private Haitian port of Labadee after a massive earthquake in 2010 killed more than 230,000 Haitians, injured more than 300,000, and left more than a million homeless. Although Royal Caribbean drew early criticism for its actions, Keller describes how considerations that paralleled ubuntu philosophy enabled the cruise line to take what many later concluded to be proper actions by supporting Haitians who depend on cruise stops for their livelihood.

In Chapter 24, Sarah Maben and Jacqueline J. Lambiase examine how Sony addressed 77 million registered users of its PlayStation Network who were unable to use the online system for nearly two months after hackers exposed a security flaw. Through the use of Rotary International’s Four-Way Test—a Christian-based framework developed specifically for business situations by Chicago manufacturer Herbert Taylor—the authors state that Sony might have adopted a more forthright dialogue with its users rather than keeping them largely in the dark on how soon service would be restored.

The section closes with Chapter 25, where Qingjiang Yao and Connie Eigenmann-Malik examine the actions of Hewlett-Packard Co. and its strategic communications consultant, APCO Worldwide, concerning HP’s internal investigation of then-CEO Mark Hurd and whether he violated the company’s sexual harassment policies. The decision to publicize the inquiry is viewed through the lens of Confucianism, with the authors asserting that under certain circumstances, a transparent approach may not be the most optimal one.

No doubt, in our quest to broaden the field of philosophical discussion to include diverse non-utilitarian perspectives, we have omitted worldviews that are worthy of consideration. We also recognize that the contributors’ application of the philosophical frameworks to their case studies might be quite different from how other scholars may have reasoned. Still, we hope this book will contribute to our mutual need to confront more comprehensively ethical dilemmas in the increasingly complex world of media practices.

We wish to thank our editorial assistants for their contributions to the second edition: Nancy Webb-Prodnuk, Shanna Phillips, Michelle Simms, and Ryan Pace.

Mitchell Land
Koji Fuse
Bill W. Hornaday

10—Contemporary Media Ethics
CHAPTER I

THE POINT-OF-DECISION PYRAMID MODEL FOR MEDIA ETHICS IN THE GLOBALIZED WORLD

MITCHELL LAND
KOJI FUSE

This introductory chapter discusses the theoretical background that informs this book’s second edition. As in the first edition, the Point-of-Decision Pyramid Model begins with a philosophical foundation, prompts a decision maker to summarize case facts, prioritize principles/values and stakeholders/loyalties respectively, and finally reach an informed decision. The book calls for contrasting utilitarianism with non-utilitarianism rather than communitarianism. In addition, the principles of harmony and diversity are introduced to the model, joining the five principles elucidated and employed in the first edition. Non-utilitarian approaches include many non-Western philosophies, as well as Western ones that are non-mainstream. We believe that applying non-Western philosophical frameworks to some of the new U.S. or U.S.-related international cases makes a contribution to global ethics, something few scholars have done.

As we asked in the preface, why produce yet another media ethics book? The market already has many written by the field’s prominent scholars and professionals. In response, we suggest three reasons why this book is distinct from other such texts.

First, informed by our diverse cultural and international experiences, we have replaced the “utilitarian versus communitarian” comparisons in the first edition with those of a “non-utilitarian versus utilitarian” perspective for this edition. This allows us to accommodate a diverse array of ethical approaches, which include not only communitarianism but also non-Western philosophies such as Confucianism and Islam, and even non-mainstream Western perspectives such as feminism and dialogic ethics, as counterpoints to utilitarianism.

Indeed, the “globalized world” is increasingly part of our daily lives in the United States. These non-Western philosophies provide additional tools with which to analyze ethical challenges that media practitioners face in a multicultural environment. We believe that the implied supremacy and
universality of Western ethical theories espoused by most media ethics texts should be balanced with the possibility that worldviews from other societies can be added to the toolbox of ethics analysis. As we noted in the preface, no knowledge was universal at its outset.

Second, as in the first edition, we present Mitchell Land’s Point-of-Decision Pyramid Model as a decision-making strategy for each case chapter, yet update it with two additional principles. Joining “truth,” “humaneness,” “justice,” “freedom/liberty,” and “stewardship,” are “harmony” and “diversity.” These latest principles are foundational within many non-Western philosophies. This is not to suggest that these seven principles definitively represent all cultures worldwide, but to assert that adding harmony and diversity invites greater opportunity to enrich the analysis.

Third and finally, it is readily apparent that despite higher education’s increasing emphasis on ethics in many disciplines, the professional world of media practice is rife with behaviors that range from the ethically dubious to overt malpractice. Each case study in this latest edition deals with new U.S. or U.S.-related international cases that involve print and broadcast news media, the Internet and social media, and public relations and advertising. Additionally, for the more controversial cases, chapter authors attempted to contact at least one protagonist or antagonist to solicit insider viewpoints.

As a starting point, this chapter reviews some of the unethical practices in news media, mass communication, and other institutions in general. Then we address some of the limitations of Enlightenment ethics, including classical utilitarianism as well as the strengths and weaknesses of communitarianism. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the revised Point-of-Decision Pyramid Model and how it can be applied to addressing ethical dilemmas in media practices.

**ETHICAL CHALLENGES AND PUBLIC TRUST**

Public trust in the news media has suffered for years. For example, a September 2012 Gallup poll showed that 60 percent of respondents expressed little or no trust and confidence in newspapers, television, and radio concerning their full, accurate, and fair reporting of news. This represents the highest level of public distrust in the media since Gallup began posing the question in the late 1990s. Longitudinal data on institutions collected by Gallup showed that public confidence in newspapers fell from 39 percent in May 1973 to 25 percent in June 2012. Likewise, confidence in television news slipped from 46 percent in March 1993 to 21 percent in June 2012. The data also indicated a serious decline in public confidence for Congress (from 42 percent in May 1973 to 13 percent in
June 2012) and the presidency (from 72 percent in February 1991 to 37 percent in June 2012). The following graph illustrates a June 2013 poll in which only 23 percent of respondents expressed a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in TV news or newspapers. Public confidence in Congress was only 10 percent by comparison.

Egregious violations of professional standards of conduct have become all too common in the United States and likely contribute to the public’s low esteem toward news media. Perhaps the most commonly cited recent example is that of Jayson Blair, a reporter for the New York Times who fabricated many of his articles—including stories on the Washington, DC-area sniper shootings in October 2002—and resigned in May 2003. Upon doing so, Blair joined an infamous list of nationally disgraced journalists, such as Janet Cooke, Stephen Glass, Patricia Smith, and Cooke, formerly of the Washington Post, lost her Pulitzer Prize in 1981 when she admitted to concocting the story of an eight-year-old heroin addict she called “Jimmy.” Glass, an associate editor for The New Republic, was fired in 1998 for fabricating a story titled “Hack Heaven” about computer hackers who extorted money from computer companies. Subsequent investigations of his work revealed he had artfully crafted fictitious details in twenty-seven of forty-one stories over two-and-a-half years. The Boston Globe’s Smith resigned that same year after she admitted to making up people and quotes in several columns. Those fabrications were found by editors during a routine check. Kelley, a twenty-one-year veteran at USA Today, resigned in January 2004 after the newspaper found evidence that he had faked or exaggerated numerous stories since the early 1990s.

Gallup poll describing trust levels in U.S. institutions

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Jack Shafer of *Slate* wrote that journalists such as Blair, Cooke, Glass, and Smith get away with embellishing stories because of the trust that develops over time between reporters and their editors. He suggested that most dishonest journalists make things up because they lack “the talent or the ability to get the story any other way.” He warned editors to be leery of any story’s details that sound too good to be true, appear as a result of pressure exerted on reporters, or should have been in the reporters’ first draft. Still, he said, “it’s almost impossible for an editor to beat a good liar every time out.”

It is easy to recognize these high-profile examples of misconduct as unethical. Willful falsification is considered “the most egregious breach of the ethic of truth telling.” Whether they realize it or not, journalists who embellish, falsify, or plagiarize stories are guided by a philosophical framework called ethical egoism. A decision to fabricate stories is based on these journalists’ self-interests, not those of their employer or the readers they serve. Clearly, both journalist and organization lose in the long run.

Ethical lapses are not always as straightforward as a fabricated or plagiarized story. How facts are gathered and reported also can present ethical challenges. Jim Van Vliet, a veteran sportswriter for the *Sacramento Bee*, was fired in August 2003 after he filed a story about a game he did not attend—but only watched on television. His account of the San Francisco Giants’ game at San Francisco’s Pacific Bell Park (now AT&T Park) included unattributed quotes from other sources. Although the story and quotes were accurate, how Van Vliet gathered the information violated basic journalistic values and ethics as practiced by the *Bee*, and management had no choice but to fire an employee of thirty-four years.

Two *Newsweek* staff writers reported in 2005 that military interrogators flushed a copy of the Koran down a toilet at the detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The magazine soon retracted the story. It relied upon “a knowledgeable U.S. government source,” who later could not recall where he had read about the alleged Koran incident, and two Defense Department officials—one disputing the allegation and the other declining comment. Yet the damage was already done. Riots broke out worldwide, resulting in more than a dozen deaths. In 2012, science writer Jonah Lehrer repeatedly committed self-plagiarism, or the recycling of one’s own previous publication partially or in its entirety. After he admitted to making up quotes and resigned from *The New Yorker*, a later investigation revealed that Lehrer not only committed self-plagiarism and fabricated or misused quotes, but plagiarized others’ work and exhibited a “reckless disregard for the truth” by repeatedly failing to correct factual errors after readers identified them.
In recent years, selective editing of videos—particularly for partisan purposes—has crossed ethical lines by contributing error to news reports when such videos “go viral” and emerge in mainstream media. Although media outlets claim they simply report on available information, their failure to get facts straight can easily complicate people’s lives. In 2010, the late Andrew Breitbart, a conservative political blogger and commentator, released through his website BigGovernment.com a heavily edited video of Shirley Sherrod, then the Department of Agriculture’s rural development director in Georgia, making what seemed to be a racially divisive comment about her initial reluctance to help a white farmer two decades earlier. The video prompted Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack to ask for Sherrod’s resignation, which she gave. But an unedited video that surfaced a day later cleared her name. In fact, Sherrod was discussing racial reconciliation by learning from her own experience. Both Vilsack and President Obama apologized to Sherrod with an offer to return to the USDA, which she declined. Sherrod later sued Breitbart and two other parties for defamation and emotional distress. Attorneys for the one of the defendants, Larry O’Connor, argued that the lawsuit violated their freedom of speech as bloggers and sought its dismissal under the District of Columbia Anti-SLAPP Act of 2010, designed to prevent critics from being silenced through legal action. A district court denied the motion and in June 2013, the U.S. Court of Appeals District of Columbia circuit affirmed the lower court’s ruling.

Public relations and advertising professionals also deal with a skeptical public that questions their ethical commitment. In public relations, professionals and the industry need to question both the means used to reach objectives and the consequences of the practice, which should be grounded in “solid principles.” For example, a number of commentators and journalists accepted payment from the Bush administration to promote its policies. Maggie Gallagher, through a $21,500 contract with the Department of Health and Human Services, defended the Bush marriage initiative in her syndicated columns in 2002. Armstrong Williams, through a $240,000 contract with the Department of Education arranged by global public relations firm Ketchum, promoted No Child Left Behind on his syndicated TV and radio shows in 2004. During that same year, Michael J. McManus, through a subcontract with a consulting firm working for the Department of Health and Human Services worth up to $10,000, promoted marriage in his syndicated columns. NBC’s Chris Matthews used precious minutes of his primetime show “Hard Ball with Chris Matthews” in June 2013 to praise—and thus promote—HBO’s “The Newsroom” without disclosing that he was a paid consultant, although he did disclose that his son, Thomas, is an actor in the series. While these commentators and journalists, whether liberal or
conservative, may genuinely hold the views they espouse, they should fully disclose to viewers and readers the source of their sponsorships.

Complicating public relations ethics is the proliferation of social media where outright deceptions—including fake personalities—pop up. On September 27, 2006, a blog called “Wal-Marting Across America” was launched. It featured the journey of “Laura and Jim,” who blogged about their positive encounters with Wal-Mart employees while parking their recreational vehicle for free at Wal-Mart stores on their way from Las Vegas to Georgia. Yet their entire trip—their flights to Las Vegas, the RV, fuel, and free-lance fees for blog entries—was paid for by Working Families for Wal-Mart, an organization formed by global public relations firm Edelman to counter Wal-Mart’s union-funded critics.26

Similarly, advertising exists as a perpetual paradox, as the industry—a major economic, social, and competitive force in the modern world—is “a bull’s-eye for public wrath.”27 The tobacco industry provided a convenient target in the 1990s with the accusation that advertisements for Camel cigarettes, which featured the animated character Joe Camel, targeted children. Activist groups eventually succeeded in pressuring R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company to remove Joe Camel from its advertising and marketing.28 Certainly, individuals and media organizations have a right to freedom of expression and to generate profits in the process. Media enterprises could not exist, let alone serve the public with their information, products, and services, without financial incentives and surplus capital. While the public may take for granted the exaggerations and ethical lapses of national tabloids and sensational TV shows, it expects most media to behave responsibly, guided by ethical principles. Most scholars and practitioners agree on the need for greater ethical rigor in the workplace. However, they neither agree upon what constitutes good journalism, appropriate media practice, or professional public relations/advertising practice, nor which philosophic views to use as the basis for their moral reasoning.

Whatever differences may exist among scholars and media practitioners on what constitutes ethical behavior, recent events have shown that an organization that fosters unethical—and illegal—media practices eventually could be shut down. The 2011 collapse of Britain’s News of the World, founded in 1843, occurred after journalists allegedly hacked the phones of British military personnel killed in action and deleted voicemail from a missing British teenager who was later found murdered. News of the World staff allegedly colluded with rogue law enforcement officials to obtain information illegally to feed the newspaper’s insatiable appetite for scandal.29

Ethical breaches in media practices, along with growing public concern, have inspired a steady stream of books, case studies, articles, and new ethics
courses over the past thirty years in an effort to define what good journalism should be and how it should be practiced. Most of these resources offer a rich overview of the philosophical foundations for ethics, ranging from the Western cultural heritage of Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian religions to the Enlightenment philosophers, although they generally disregard non-Western philosophical approaches.\textsuperscript{30}

**ENLIGHTENMENT ETHICS**

Alasdair MacIntyre argues in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* that the so-called Enlightenment project failed and continues to fail because the concepts of “natural rights” and “utility” are moral fictions based on the culture of individualism.\textsuperscript{31} While building a case for Aristotelian virtue ethics, he ascribes the failure of the Enlightenment to the rise of emotivism, or “the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character.”\textsuperscript{32} In other words, emotivism impoverished moral discourse because it consists of no more than individual opinions without rational criteria for evaluation, therefore degenerating into philosophical debates between two paradigms of seemingly objective—but essentially subjective—rules and principles: deontology and utilitarianism. Both normative ethical theories are grounded in individualism, which is the cornerstone of libertarianism.

**KANTIAN DEONTOLOGY**

Chief among the Enlightenment moral philosophers is Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant is credited with articulating the deontological approach, which emphasizes duty ethics. The Greek word *deon*, the root word of deontology, means duty. Focusing on right and wrong, deontology refers to the idea that one should act on principle or according to a universal moral duty rather than solely on the basis of consequences.

For Kant, the starting point of moral reasoning is personal conviction or intuition rather than some sort of external moral authority or consequences alone.\textsuperscript{33} In his *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (*Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*), Kant distinguishes hypothetical from categorical imperatives: “The former represent
the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to attain something else which one wills (or which it is possible that one might will). The categorical imperative would be that one which represented an action as objectively necessary for itself, without any reference to another end.\textsuperscript{34}

In other words, the hypothetical imperative denotes an action that is “good merely as a means to something else,” whereas the categorical imperative, the cornerstone of Kantian deontology, dictates an action that is “represented as good in itself, hence necessary, as the principle of the will, in a will that in itself accords with reason.”\textsuperscript{35}

In summary, Kant believed that rational beings should act only on the principle or standard that could become a universal law, rather than on the basis of unknowable outcomes. That is, rational beings should act in a way that they would wish all others to act—and that the maxim of the action must be applied universally. Moreover, Kant insisted that each rational being be treated as an end rather than some means to an end, which underscored a respect for human dignity. Similar to the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” his categorical imperative implies ethical reciprocity. He argued that the will of each rational being must not merely be bound by universal law, but be considered as the authoritative source of the universal law.

The appeal of Kant’s categorical imperative is that it provides rules or guidelines to follow before ethical dilemmas arise, and that all similar circumstances would not change the rule or guideline. But strict adherence to the categorical imperative ignores the possibility of competing rules or principles. Indeed, moral dilemmas arise when values, whether moral or nonmoral, and abiding principles compete or collide.\textsuperscript{36} Recognizing this difficulty, Kant wrote in his ethics lecture notes that if someone tries to use the truth for a wrong purpose, lying to that person is permissible. In other words, we should choose the “stronger duty.”\textsuperscript{37} Unfortunately, this solution remains inherently intuitive.

**Utilitarianism**

During the immediate post-Enlightenment era, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and his protégé, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), introduced a teleological approach called (classical) utilitarianism. Actual or anticipated consequences of an action, rather than the motives or character traits of the individual taking the action, are the determining criterion in classical utilitarianism, which seeks to maximize pleasure while minimizing pain, or to promote happiness while mitigating unhappiness, to engender the best positive outcome in a given situation.
Bentham held that the axiom—“the greatest happiness of the greatest number”—is the measure of right and wrong, and individuals should take actions accordingly. In An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, he stated that “Ethics at large may be defined, the art of directing men’s actions to the production of the greatest possible quantity of happiness, on the part of those whose interest is in view.” This idea was based on his naturalist observation that “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do.” Bentham subsequently defined his notion of utility:

By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness, (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered: if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community: if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual.

It should be noted, however, that Bentham believed in the reductionist model of community: “The community is a fictitious body, composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its members. The interest of the community then is, what?—the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it.”

Therefore, as stated earlier, Bentham’s notion of utility is rooted in the individual’s quest to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. Each individual tries to maximize utility or psychological satisfaction, and minimize disutility, or psychological dissatisfaction.

Bentham proposed quantifying the value of a pleasure or the disvalue of a pain in terms of its seven “circumstances” or dimensions: intensity, duration, certainty or uncertainty, propinquity or remoteness, fecundity (“the chance it has of being followed by sensations of the same kind,” like pleasures if it be a pleasure), purity (“the chance it has of not being followed by sensations of the opposite kind,” like pains if it be a pleasure), and extent (“the number of persons to whom
Assigning a value to each type of pleasure or pain would make it possible to compare apples and oranges, so to speak. Thus, his infamous statement on “push-pin,” a children’s game, indicates no qualitative difference among types of pleasure, whether sophisticated or vulgar:

Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either. Everybody can play at push-pin: poetry and music are relished only by a few. The game of push-pin is always innocent: it were well could the same be always asserted of poetry. Indeed, between poetry and truth there is a natural opposition: false morals, fictitious nature: the poet always stands in need of something false.45

Building on Bentham’s utilitarianism, revising it, and sometimes contradicting him, Mill attempted to present a more nuanced version of classical utilitarianism. In Utilitarianism, he declared that “All action is for the sake of some end,”46 but that no direct proof is available for presuming happiness as the ultimate end.47 However, utilitarianism treats the “greatest happiness principle” as the first principle—common ground of obligation—which subordinates all other secondary principles, or ordinary moral rules. Because desire is the only evidence for desirability and each person actually desires his or her own happiness, “happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end,” and by extension, happiness for the “aggregate of all persons” is desired and desirable.48 Therefore:

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure . . . pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.49

Mill acknowledged the role of ancient Greek philosophers, such as Socrates and Epicurus, in utilitarianism’s development.50 In Dissertations and Discussions, he wrote:

According to the Sokrates of the Protagoras, there is nothing good as an end except pleasure and the absence of pain; all other good things are but means to these. Virtue is an affair of calculation, and the sole elements of
the calculation are pains and pleasures. But the elements computed are the agent’s own pains and pleasures, omitting those of other people, and of mankind.\textsuperscript{51}

In fact, Aristotle saw happiness as leading a virtuous life. The stoics also identified happiness with virtue. Assuming that all pleasures were good and all pains evil, the Epicurean virtue was situated squarely with the individual and the quest of pleasure over pain. The foundation of Epicureanism bordered on egoistic hedonism, but temperance was necessary to gain individual long-term happiness because not all pleasures were worth choosing and not all pains worth avoiding.\textsuperscript{52}

Greek culture gave to the world the concepts of democracy, philosophy, science, and literature, along with the values of human dignity, rational thought, and the cultivation of virtue: “A new view of humanity appeared among Greek thinkers of the fifth century — they became conscious of human beings as human.”\textsuperscript{53} For example, Aristotle stated in \textit{Metaphysics}, “(Protagoras) said that man is the measure of all things, by which he meant simply that each individual’s impressions are positively true.”\textsuperscript{54} These observations by the ancient Greek philosophers reveal the significance held of the individual and hence the centrality of the individual in democratic society. It is also easy to infer from these philosophers that the individual was considered the first, if not the ultimate, arbiter of right and wrong. Ancient Greek philosophy valued individuality and the utilitarian quest for pleasure or happiness. Utilitarianism was a major philosophical framework then just as it dominates modern ethical practice today.

However, Mill’s version of utilitarianism did not remain embedded in ancient Greek philosophy. He believed that human suffering was conquerable by human care and effort, and that with time, the greater good could be attained. The utilitarian would be willing, if not required, to make self-sacrifice for the greater good, which was the mark of the highest virtue that could be expressed in humankind.\textsuperscript{55}

Therefore, some scholars have criticized those who espouse traditional individualistic interpretations of Mill for ignoring the communitarian nature of his version of utilitarianism.\textsuperscript{56} In fact, Mill argued that “the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent’s own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.”\textsuperscript{57} Mill’s version of utilitarianism does not lead to ethical egoism. He recognized that “few but those whose mind is a moral blank, could bear to lay out their course of life on the plan of paying no regard to others except so far as their own private interest compels.”\textsuperscript{58}
Moreover, he emphasized the importance of social influence and education to cultivate appropriate moral sentiments to overcome egocentrism. This is because “In an improving state of the human mind, the influences are constantly on the increase, which tend to generate in each individual a feeling of unity with all the rest; which feeling, if perfect, would make him never think of, or desire, any beneficial condition for himself, in the benefits of which they (others) are not included,” naturally making him want to attain “harmony between his feelings and aims and those of his fellow creatures.”59 Even if opinions diverge, individuals must be aware that their real aim and that of others should be to promote the good of others, which is the “ultimate sanction of the greatest-happiness morality.”60

Yet, Mill was a staunch defender of liberty, insisting that “the only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”61 Each individual possesses “liberty of conscience,” “liberty of thought and feeling,” “absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects,” “liberty of expressing and publishing opinions,” “liberty of tastes and pursuits,” liberty of “framing the plan of our life to suit our own character,” liberty of “doing as we like,” and “liberty of combination among individuals” or “freedom to unite.”62 In particular, absolute freedom of opinion and expression would be necessary to supply the facts, evidence, and better arguments because truth would not hold inherent power to always win over persecution.63 While positing that individuals and governments have a duty “to form the truest opinions they can,” Mill recommended being open-minded to listen—even to those who challenge a received opinion—to attain a better, if not whole, and stronger truth through the collision of contrasting opinions.64 In this light, he further emphasized the importance of individuality, even eccentricity,65 focusing on the long-term effect of individual liberty:

Mill thinks we should maximize utility, not case by case, but in the long run. And over time, he argues, respecting individual liberty will lead to the greatest human happiness. Allowing the majority to silence dissenters or censor free thinkers might maximize utility today, but it will make society worse off—less happy—in the long run.66

Arguing that “the motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action,” he restricted the meaning of the “greatest happiness principle” to generally being applicable to a much smaller entity than the world or society at large. Good actions often are intended “not for the benefit of the world, but for that of individuals, of which the good of the world is made up,” and even the
The most virtuous person has only to think about “the particular persons concerned” unless he or she is violating the rights of anyone else. The following statement precisely points out a rhetorical disconnect between the idealistic, broad-based greatest-happiness principle that promotes the happiness of the entire world, society, or community, and Mill’s pragmatic, locally situated version of utilitarianism. The latter focuses on the happiness of only a few people close to each individual whose opinion, though disinterested, carries far more weight in small-group decision-making than in large society:

The multiplication of happiness is, according to the utilitarian ethics, the object of virtue: the occasions on which any person (except one in a thousand) has it in his power to do this on an extended scale, in other words, to be a public benefactor, are but exceptional; and on these occasions alone is he called on to consider public utility; in every other case, private utility, the interest or happiness of some few persons, is all he has to attend to.

Different from Bentham, Mill distinguished between higher and lower pleasures by declaring that “the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments [have] a much higher value as pleasures than . . . those of mere sensation.” Qualitative differences in pleasures reflect higher faculties of humans as opposed to the basal instincts of beasts: “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.” Mill contended it “would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.” Yet his ultimate resolution on the issue of quality came down to the majoritarian rule, which was elitist in nature:

On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures, or which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final. And there needs be the less hesitation to accept this judgment respecting the quality of pleasures,
since there is no other tribunal to be referred to even on the question of quantity.\textsuperscript{72}

Robert Nozick once criticized utilitarian theory as being “embarrassed by the possibility of utility monsters who get enormously greater gains in utility from any sacrifice of others than these others lose. For, unacceptably, the theory seems to require that we all be sacrificed in the monster’s maw, in order to increase total utility.”\textsuperscript{73} This critique could also apply to Mill’s version of utilitarianism. Despite its recognition of qualitative differences among pleasures, all “fools” unqualified to evaluate higher pleasures immediately would be dismissed and the majoritarian rule among elites would be the final arbiter of decision making. Only then, the greatest-happiness principle considers consequences of an action and attempts to maximize happiness of all.

Mill’s version of utilitarianism does not advocate moral relativism because, as stated before, it does not automatically degenerate into ethical egoism. However, his concept of justice does illuminate a general utilitarian assumption that the end justifies the means:

Justice is a name for certain moral requirements, which, regarded collectively, stand higher in the scale of social utility, and are therefore of more paramount obligation, than any others; though particular cases may occur in which some other social duty is so important, as to overrule any one of the general maxims of justice. Thus to save a life, it may not only be allowable, but a duty, to steal, or take by force, the necessary food or medicine, or to kidnap, and compel to officiate the only qualified medical practitioner.\textsuperscript{74}

Several concerns, then, become evident with a strict utilitarian application. For example, how can an individual be certain that a particular decision will bring about happiness? One cannot know the exact consequences of an action already taken, much less whether it will serve the long-term good of society. In addition, does it make sense to argue that happiness for the “aggregate of all persons” is desired and desirable just because each individual desires his or her happiness? In other words, Mill seems to have committed the “fallacy of composition”: a logically illicit deduction that the whole collectively, or organically, carries a certain attribute from the premise that each of its parts individually possesses the same attribute.\textsuperscript{75} However, in \textit{A System of Logic}, he articulated “a type of reductive individualism wherein the happiness of a group is a theoretically useful fictional derivative of the several happinesses of individual persons who jointly and exhaustively constitute that group.”\textsuperscript{76} This not only absolves Mill from the charge of committing the fallacy, but also demonstrates his endorsement of Bentham’s notion of community. Also, does the end justify
the means? Mill qualified this principle by saying that in certain cases, one might have to let some other significant social duty overrule any one of the maxims of justice. Yet the principle itself, no matter how it is qualified, is a slippery slope because of the elitist, majoritarian decision-making process embedded in his version of utilitarianism.

In the final analysis, classical utilitarianism is a liberty-based ethical philosophy whose ultimate goal is to promote the happiness of each individual in society—not society as an organic whole—as it is “committed to a neutral scientific methodology that presumes moral agents are autonomous individuals.”\(^{77}\) In other words, the rights of the individual communicator to absolute freedom of expression are the foundational prerequisite of Enlightenment liberalism to enact his or her responsibility to the community, which consists of discrete individuals.

Interestingly, Mill considered Kant’s approach to be utilitarian because it is ultimately derived from circumstances that have consequences. Mill contended that Kant failed to show any contradiction or logical impossibility in all rational beings’ adoption of the most egregious and immoral rules of conduct, but merely demonstrated that such universal adoption would generate consequences no one would like to incur.\(^{78}\) Further, for Kantian deontology to make sense, persons must shape their conduct according to “a rule which all rational beings might adopt with benefit to their collective interest.”\(^{79}\) Even the Ten Commandments are linked to consequences. The prohibition of adultery results in good consequences—peace in the marriage. In other words, the Ten Commandments embody principles that, when followed, beget good consequences.\(^{80}\) Therefore, it is obvious that people cannot completely ignore possible consequences of their actions.

Kant’s categorical imperative emerges from a personal “intuitive” assessment of circumstances and their consequences, just as Mill’s moral reasoning emerges from a personal “inductive” assessment of circumstances and their consequences. The important difference is that Mill’s act-utilitarianism—the principle that considers an act morally right if it generates the most amount of pleasure or happiness for all concerned\(^{81}\)—is more open to moral relativism than Kant’s categorical imperative. Although rules are malleable in utilitarianism and not necessarily to be projected universally, depending upon the perceived consequences, Kant’s categorical imperative is a universal rule to be applied to all similar circumstances. Both perspectives depend primarily on the individual’s assessment of duty or utility, and only secondarily on moral reasoning derived from community. Of course, given that these ideas are rooted
in the age of Enlightenment, it is no surprise that the burden for moral decision making rests squarely on the individual, the centerpiece of libertarianism.

As a practical matter, moral reasoning for most individuals involves a synthesis of philosophic approaches. Western ethical principles have been handed down through culture via religion, education, family, and other social processes to become internalized. The individual, in effect, is a social construct: One’s identity is largely fashioned by the multilayered society in which he or she is a part. So individuals weigh their self-interest, or ego, with competing interests in light of internalized codes of moral behavior and the basis of perceived outcomes. Journalists also reason from both deontological and teleological positions: “On the one hand, they subscribe to a priori rules and maxims that they feel duty-bound to follow generally. On the other hand, they feel that on occasion they must make exceptions and take special circumstances into consideration.”

However, communitarian scholar and sociologist Amitai Etzioni states categorically that utilitarianism has become the dominant mode of moral reasoning in libertarian societies and their media enterprises. Undoubtedly, media practitioners in the West approach moral dilemmas informed by sociological factors such as family ties, religion, and professional training, but tend to favor utilitarianism as the dominant mode of moral reasoning for resolving ethical dilemmas.

CHALLENGES TO ENLIGHTENMENT ETHICS

COMMISSION ON FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

The individual-centered, libertarian framework of Western media practices was challenged by the Commission on Freedom of the Press, also known as the Hutchins Commission, in 1947. It called upon media institutions to embrace their social responsibility to (1) present “a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning”; (2) serve as “a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism”; (3) project “a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society”; (4) present and clarify “the goals and values of the society”; and (5) provide “full access to the day’s intelligence.”

Although the report referred to society’s “goals and values,” its underlying philosophy remained utilitarian, again affirming the dominance of utilitarianism in current media practice. Media scholar Edmund B. Lambeth called it “the most important statement on the media in the twentieth century,” one that “philosophically brought utilitarianism under the media tent whether the ringmasters of the press noticed or not.” Its call for social responsibility angered
the press establishment at the time. However, advocates of public or civic journalism rekindled the debate in the 1990s.87

PUBLIC JOURNALISM

The Hutchins Commission report shook the media’s philosophical foundations on the eve of monumental social and political changes in the United States that followed for decades:

- The post–World War II population explosion and ensuing suburban sprawl;
- The revving up of the Cold War and the civil rights movement in the 1950s;
- A presidential assassination, the climax of the civil rights movement, the so-called counter-cultural revolution, the Vietnam War, and the continued nuclear threat of the Cold War in the 1960s;
- The women’s movement, the Watergate scandal, the Pentagon Papers, the Vietnam War’s ignoble end, and the Cold War’s protraction during the 1970s.

These and other societal tremors prompted a decline of public optimism in U.S. institutions, including the media.88 Practitioners’ concerns over the growing gap between citizens and journalists, as shown in declining newspaper readership, along with the dominance of the market-driven media organizations they worked for, fueled interest in public journalism. Focused on problem-solving rather than traditional objective reporting, public journalism seeks to improve public life by addressing societal challenges head-on and promoting public participation and debate to nourish representative government.

Public journalism is consistent with one of traditional journalism’s basic objectives, which is “to tell people what they need to know so that they can participate in self-governance.”89 Yet, its advocates argue that media professionals should give the public more than disjointed, decontextualized stories and episodic, value-neutral information, so communities can make sense of life’s complexities.90

COMMUNITARIAN ETHICS

Thus, the quest for what constitutes good journalism continues. Is it traditional journalism, evolved from the Enlightenment with an emphasis on individual liberty? Or is it public journalism, with its call for greater social responsibility? Some are content with traditional journalism and a utilitarian approach informed by individualism and libertarianism.91 Others advocate a communitarian approach to moral reasoning, a framework of normative social
ethics rooted in communitarian democracy. Public journalism, therefore, has been argued in the spirit of communitarianism.

This debate was well expounded in Jay Black’s *Mixed News*, whose contributors presented chapters from both sides of the philosophical divide. Their discussions on journalism’s best practices seemed to revolve around issues of rights and responsibilities such as individual priority versus community priority, informing the community versus building the community, and freedom versus social responsibility. Good journalism, according to this view, should be grounded in community instead of individualism. Communitarian ethics does not discount the individual, but seeks to strike a balance between individual freedom and social responsibility, or the greater social order, based on shared virtues. This equilibrium of individual accountability, when rooted in community-derived moral principles, is intended to foster accountability to the community of humankind. Community writ large becomes a major starting point or source for moral reasoning, which seeks a judicious balance of rights and responsibilities. Although journalism is a business that functions along market principles, money should not hold total control. This view advocates a transformed corporate culture in which employees and communities have a voice, which in turn allows a communitarian ethic to develop.

Communitarian ethics also assumes universal values or protonorms agreed upon by humanity regardless of cultural specificities. It neither espouses nor eschews tribal or communal values per se, but holds them accountable to universal values that serve to sustain human solidarity. Without such values, nations never could have acted interdependently in 1948 to agree upon the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Principles of justice, humaneness, and liberty were articulated on the values of equality and human dignity in this historic document.

Utilitarianism would not dismiss the status of shared values and principles, such as individual rights and freedom. However, utilitarianism makes consequences—as reasoned by the individual decision-maker—the arbiter of ethical dilemmas, while communitarianism sees community values, both small and large, as the arbiter of moral conflict.

Despite the significance of communitarianism and its emerging influence in the academy and through public journalism, the media landscape has grown intensely competitive since the 1990s because of rapid technological changes. The ongoing quest just to survive makes it difficult for media industries to fulfill the promises of communitarian public journalism. To compete with other types of online information and counter declining circulation, major newspapers led the
movement to provide free content on their websites, which sought to draw “supersized audiences” followed by “supersized ad dollars,” but apparently failed.\textsuperscript{97} The proliferation of blogs and social media only aggravated revenue loss, as many people refuse to pay for news content—be it print or online—when most of it is available for free. Even unique content available only to paid subscribers has made little difference. In addition, multiplatform journalism has blurred traditional distinctions among legacy media, further fueling competition among them.

While struggling to find a profitable business formula, the newspaper industry has laid off tens of thousands of reporters and staff. Some papers closed while others became online-only.\textsuperscript{98} At present, journalists may find it difficult to take time and reflect upon their practices and journalism ethics before thinking about how to survive.

As previously stated, communitarianism assumes universal values exemplified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We recognize that defining “universal values” is problematic. While discussing universality without qualifications, Western communitarian thinkers often fail to deconstruct seriously the nature of their presumed universality. For example:

The adoption in 1948 by the United Nations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—the foundational document of the human rights movement—sought to give universal legitimacy to a doctrine that is fundamentally Eurocentric in its construction. Sanctimonious to a fault, the Universal Declaration underscored its arrogance by proclaiming itself the “common standard of achievement for all peoples and nations.” The fact that half a century later human rights have become a central norm of global civilization does not vindicate their universality. It is rather a telling testament to the conceptual, cultural, economic, military, and philosophical domination of the European West over non-European peoples and traditions.\textsuperscript{99}

Some non-Western nations historically have questioned the ethnocentric bias covertly embedded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as it emphasizes the “individual egoist as the center of the moral universe,” draws heavily on the U.S. Bill of Rights and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, and shows no “inspiration from Asian, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, African, or any other non-European traditions.”\textsuperscript{100}

While not rejecting Western theories, some postcolonial scholars have advocated recognizing the indigenous nature of every theory, grounding the theorization of each non-Western knowledge system in its local context, and paying epistemic respect to non-Western theories.\textsuperscript{101} In addition, other
intercultural scholars have expounded unique global contributions of non-Western philosophies, such as Confucianism and the African Ubuntu philosophy. If those scholars’ combined arguments have practical merit, the next logical step—one that few media ethics scholars so far have taken—is to apply non-Western philosophies to specific ethical dilemmas in the Western world and demonstrate their cross-cultural applicability and effectiveness in moral reasoning.

In this sense, imposing communitarianism as the only counter-philosophy against utilitarianism would relegate as secondary the worldview of each non-Western philosophy. Etzioni’s sociological version has been criticized for mistakenly suggesting “a single identity or a homogeneity of communities . . . and, as a result, is guilty of attempting to impose his own Americanized version of community upon the rest of the western world.” On the other hand, Clifford G. Christians’s philosophical communitarianism discussed in Chapter 3 of this edition is clearly international in scope and thus not subject to the criticism of privileging a Western perspective. Nonetheless, by keeping this nomenclature as the only counterpoint against utilitarianism, we recognize the risk of maintaining this perceived imbalance to the rest of the non-Western world. Therefore, this book’s second edition applies the more inclusive term “non-utilitarianism” as an overarching framework that includes not only non-Western philosophies but also non-dominant Western philosophies, including communitarianism.

As in the first edition, this revision continues to bring together journalism ethics and social philosophy in case analyses, so that media practitioners will begin to acquire the ability to articulate and discuss the moral reasoning behind their decisions with citizens, who in turn engage in continual dialogue with them.

**Principles and Values**

The starting point for applying two perspectives—utilitarianism and non-utilitarianism—to media ethics cases in Western society acknowledges the legacy of the larger society in which it has developed. The principles and values of the Judeo-Christian and classical Greek civilizations comprise that legacy—and are acknowledged within ethics codes endorsed by journalism associations and news organizations. They also appear in historic documents, such as the U.S. Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and such international documents as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Again, the presumed universality of Western values and traditions risks marginalizing potential contributions from non-Western philosophical perspectives.

This book’s first edition applied the five principles highlighted in Lambeth’s *Committed Journalism* to represent the majority of moral principles
that seem to endure in the West—truth, humaneness, justice, freedom, and stewardship. This revision introduces two additional principles—harmony and diversity—which are reflected in non-Western discourse on media ethics.

We view principles and moral values as interchangeable. Principles serve as guideposts for what is right and wrong, while values, which may be thought of as “principles applied,” define what is good and bad. Another way to view this is to think of values as principles in action. It is also important to distinguish between moral and non-moral values, which often are the same as professional values. Consider, for example, professional values such as meeting a deadline, writing a story in the inverted pyramid format, getting a story first, interviewing the most authoritative source, providing the most compelling visual images, and maximizing profit. Such non-moral values can become ultimate values, thus compelling immoral action. They serve an important function to guide acceptable journalistic practice, but risk falling short of their function when allowed to trump moral values, which are principles applied.

Ethical dilemmas arise when complex situations pit principles against each other and cause us to question whether any single, given principle can be held as absolute. The confusion of non-moral values with moral values also creates ethical dilemmas. Resolving such dilemmas requires weighing competing principles and their associated values, along with rights and responsibilities, in the context of relevant stakeholders. The case studies in this book apply the following seven principles:

**TRUTH**

Truth should compel factual reporting, which seeks accurate information within the proper context. The value of telling the truth, which is the principle of truth applied, contrasts sharply with deceiving a source to obtain information or telling an outright lie—a negative application of the truth and an action that most consider bad or immoral. Jayson Blair’s fabricated stories in the *New York Times* violated the principle of truth, which is perhaps the most highly regarded professional and moral value in U.S. journalism. If journalists are expected to tell their stories truthfully to readers or viewers, should they not be expected to adhere to the same principle in their reporting practices? This is a difficult question to answer because some will argue that mitigating circumstances or perceived consequences must be factored into the equation.

**HUMANENESS**

For example, a principle competing with truth, such as humaneness, may compel actions that others would consider deceptive in the interest of protecting
the public. One such case occurred when producers of ABC’s *Primetime Live* justified their deception at a Food Lion grocery store to expose so-called unhealthy food-handling practices. The news program argued that it acted in the interests of public health, hence “humanely.” Yet there also exists the possibility that the non-moral professional value of telling a compelling story with dynamic images, which is vital for television, trumped the basic journalistic tenet and moral value of truth telling in events that led to a lengthy and expensive lawsuit filed by Food Lion against ABC News and its then-parent company.\(^{110}\)

Humaneness is rooted in the primal instinct toward preserving, nurturing, and protecting human life.\(^{111}\) This is most obvious in the parental care of children, a universal human trait. Children are protected by universally shared moral commitments, as evidenced in international efforts against child pornography. Humaneness expects people to avoid or prevent harm to others while rendering aid when possible. Sorting out one’s responsibility for rendering aid can challenge a journalist trying to cover war, famine, and other human suffering. For example, the principle of justice clashes with humaneness when media organizations become involved in raising money for some needy individuals and not others: “Compassionate reporting results in unjustified harm when news organizations participate in the same kind of institutional unfairness they are often seeking to expose.”\(^{112}\) Journalists are taught they have a duty to inform the public through fair and balanced news reporting, which contrasts with advocating for a cause. This professional duty begs the question: At what point does a journalist abandon his or her duty to tell the story and become part of it by participating in a peace rally, raising funds for a political party, or advocating for one homeless person and not another?

**JUSTICE**

Justice demands that news stories be told fairly, without omitting facts that would change the story’s meaning if otherwise included. Did ABC News omit facts so it could air a more dramatic story that exposed Food Lion’s alleged unhealthy food-handling practices? The principle of justice might cause a reporter to consider withholding evidence that could keep an accused person from receiving a fair trial. However, the principles of freedom and truth may prevail as the journalist considers his or her duty to the profession and the public. Does a newspaper’s claim to its First Amendment privilege or the professional values of news reporting compromise the principle of justice? A clash can occur between the moral value of truth telling (truth as principle) and the moral value of protecting the right to a fair trial (justice as value and principle).
**FREEDOM/LIBERTY**

The principle of freedom may compete with that of justice. This begs the question of whether freedom, which is protected by the First Amendment, can rightly push aside justice? Freedom is recognized in the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

It also includes the notion of autonomy, meaning journalists must avoid potential conflicts of interest that would threaten their ability to report without bias. Journalists are discouraged from accepting gifts, special privileges, or investments that create such conflicts—or even the appearance thereof—along with other activities that could jeopardize their independence. Journalists also should avoid getting too close to sources, such as when Chris Matthews praised an HBO television series without disclosing he served as one of its paid consultants.

**STEWARDSHIP**

Stewardship is the responsible management of something committed to one’s care, such as the stewardship of natural resources. The term is used in two ways in this book. First, media practitioners—public relations workers, advertising professionals, and journalists, reporters, editors, publishers, and media owners—are stewards of information and play a unique role in providing much of the content of public discourse. The responsible exercise of this privilege, especially for U.S. journalists, includes upholding the First Amendment by serving as stewards of free expression. Second, in an organizational context, stewardship refers to management’s responsibility to use and develop resources properly, including its people, property, and financial assets.

Media practitioners exercise stewardship as they manage communication resources “with due regard for the rights of others, the rights of the public, and the moral health of their own occupation.”

As managers contemplate the consequences of media practices, such as reporting on potentially libelous material, they exercise broad stewardship in weighing the potential effects of a lawsuit against the importance of a story scheduled for publication or broadcast. At the same time, media managers also make decisions that affect profit margins and weigh other principles that may threaten or enhance profit. At this point, the non-moral value of turning a profit enters play. Generating the necessary capital to run a media organization depends on its profitability. Therefore, important stakeholders in any decision include managers, boards of directors, and stockholders. Enormous pressures come to bear on media
practices to ensure profitability. The decision maker always must weigh the non-
moral value of profitmaking with competing moral values as they address ethical
dilemmas.

**Harmony**

Media might consider balancing news, opinion, and commentary that
risks fomenting confrontation within or between nations with newsworthy stories
that might foster amicable relations. Media also may exercise moderation and
“good sense” or decency in their editorial policies, as well as their advertising
and circulation practices. In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks,
U.S. media overwhelmingly rallied 'round the flag to unite the nation. For
example, “Television news was marked by news reporters wearing flag pins, flag
images, and red, white, and blue patriotic banners.”

The principle of harmony can mean humaneness in some situations. Yet
it also might find itself at odds with humaneness, freedom, or justice, as harmony
can be socially or politically imposed on media to curtail their ability to report
objectively and fairly. While applicable to some non-Western nations, concerns
about negative harmony are not unique to those environs. In the lead up to the
Iraq War, the *Washington Post* buried stories critical of the Bush administration
to minimize further societal disruption because the nation, along with Congress,
seemed intent on going to war anyway. The *New York Times* also published a
mea culpa editorial for similar uncritical coverage.

Yet maintaining harmony at the expense of keeping elected officials
publicly accountable is problematic at the very least. The *Times* reports that
many journalists allow news sources to clear quotes before their stories are
published. The practice, normally considered taboo in terms of journalistic
credibility, apparently has become a prerequisite for interviewing news
sources—and especially when a source represents the Obama administration.
Jeremy Peters wrote in the *Times* that quote approval was standard operating
procedure for the Obama re-election campaign by “almost all midlevel aides in
Chicago and at the White House — almost anyone other than spokesmen who are
paid to be quoted.” Allowing elected officials or their staff members to sanitize
quotes in exchange for interviews flies square in the face of traditional
journalistic practice and threatens access to accurate information on behalf of the
electorate. More alarming are reports that the Department of Justice (DOJ) seized
the e-mails and phone records of Fox News correspondent James Rosen, as well
as twenty telephone lines assigned to the Associated Press. These disclosures
outraged media organizations and others who warned of such threats to press
freedom. Associated Press President and CEO Gary Pruitt called the DOJ’s
actions unconstitutional, adding that such actions make sources less willing to talk to AP journalists and, ultimately, could limit the public’s access to information from all news outlets.124

DIVERSITY

Media can promote tolerance by offering space to diverse opinions that may differ from their own editorial ideology.125 At times, the principle of diversity may be prioritized above other principles, such as stewardship, if diversity requires serving all individuals fairly. Yet historically, this has been an uphill battle for many U.S. news organizations. Mainstream newspapers before and during the U.S. civil rights movement, for example, rarely, if ever, featured minorities in their society pages. To do so during that time period would have jeopardized revenue from subscribers who represented the majority of many communities. Conversely, media that demonstrate the mettle to assume such risks—and pay due regard to the multiethnic, cultural, and religious fabric of society, and the world—contribute to multicultural diversity. It is also presumed that diversity in the newsroom will produce more diverse content.

STAKEHOLDERS

All media practices involve various stakeholders to whom practitioners owe loyalty and must account for as ethical dilemmas arise. Journalists often think of the public as their primary stakeholders: “Insofar as journalism is grounded, it is grounded in the public. Insofar as journalism has a client, the client is the public.”126 Yet defining that public is more difficult. Initially, journalists see the public as readers and viewers. This becomes more complicated when individuals in this huge audience are those being reported on. A newspaper reporter writes that journalists often define their publics by what they are not: “If we attack cantankerous bureaucrats and corrupt officials, then they are not the public. If we monitor the public institutions that catch criminals, educate our youth, build our roads, and pick up our trash, then they are not the public either. It is not the powerful, the power brokers, the movers and shakers.”127

On the other hand, even if these entities may not fit the implied meaning of “public” for journalists as a story is reported, they do become considerable stakeholders when ethical dilemmas or potentially libelous situations arise. While end-users of media products and services may be the largest group of stakeholders involved, many other groups can enter the fray. The media practitioner also answers to editors, producers, and public relations or advertising supervisors, who themselves report to higher-level executives in any media organization. In turn, those organizations answer to directors and stockholders.
Individuals and organizations that become part of any media situation—such as news articles, feature stories, and public relations and advertising campaigns—become key stakeholders, especially as situations become complicated or ethically challenging. Components of the judiciary—such as judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, or even jurors—also may become prominent stakeholders.

The media professional has much to mull over when confronting an ethical situation: the complicated facts of a case, competing principles and values—including non-moral values—and the various stakeholders to whom is owed certain loyalties. Ralph B. Potter, professor emeritus of social ethics at Harvard Divinity School, devised a heuristic model for ethical decision making, which later became known as the Potter Box. He argues that whether implicitly or explicitly, four elements of moral argument always inhere in deliberations of policy issues: (1) the empirical facts or definition of the situation, (2) theological or quasi-theological perspectives, (3) decisions or affirmation of fundamental loyalties, and (4) modes of ethical reasoning. He explains that change in any one element most likely will modify the entire pattern of ethical reasoning, which implies that the model’s four elements are interactive.

Christians and his colleagues renamed and rearranged those four elements—situation definition, values, principles, and loyalties—and applied the Potter Box model as a framework for moral reasoning through ethical dilemmas in the cases contained in Media Ethics: Cases in Moral Reasoning. The model recognizes the interconnectedness of circumstances, principles and values, and the rights and privileges that varied stakeholders may claim in any given situation. See Figure 1.1.

As the media practitioner considers the essential facts of a case, he or she will begin to see why certain values and principles emerge as important. Identifying primary and secondary stakeholders will then suggest to the analyst the loyalties, rights, and principles that must compete for primacy.

Carefully considering the stakeholders involved helps the media professional question his or her reasons for taking actions that may challenge principles he or she otherwise might have taken for granted. The decision maker then may come to realize that certain professional values held personally—or by superiors, or by the organization, for example—may tend to eclipse moral values. Christians and others suggest that reasoning in systematic fashion from one quadrant to the other will advance the decision maker from moral reasoning toward decision-making and actions based on thorough analyses. See Figure 1.2.
Figure 1.1
THE POTTER BOX

Situation Definition
ESTABLISHING THE FACTS
OF THE CASE

Loyalties
DETERMINING THE
STAKEHOLDERS

Values
ESTABLISHING VALUES, BOTH
MORAL AND NON-MORAL

Principles
IDENTIFYING COMPETING
PRINCIPLES

Figure 1.2
POTTER BOX ANALYSIS

Situation Definition
ESTABLISHING THE FACTS
OF THE CASE

Loyalties
DETERMINING THE
STAKEHOLDERS

Action/Decision

Values
ESTABLISHING VALUES, BOTH
MORAL AND NON-MORAL

Principles
IDENTIFYING COMPETING
PRINCIPLES

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THE REVISED POINT-OF-DECISION PYRAMID MODEL

Any heuristic device applied to real-world situations may seem rather simplistic in light of the complexity of social and professional life, the myriad details involved in human interaction, complex situations, and any competing belief systems. Indeed, one limitation of the Potter Box may be its lack of any inherent or implied philosophical framework to serve as a foundation for analysis. As proposed and explained in the first edition, a modified Potter Box model called the “Point-of-Decision Pyramid Model” attempts to base analysis on a philosophical foundation. Yet the model revised for this edition now contrasts two philosophical approaches—utilitarianism and non-utilitarianism—and proposes seven principles rather than five.

Figuratively, we take the Potter Box diagram at its midpoint and pull it up into a three-dimensional Point-of-Decision Pyramid Model with a foundation, which helps the media practitioner think through an ethical dilemma to the point of making a decision. This pyramid assumes a weltanschauung at the outset. In light of the prominence of utilitarian ethics in media practice and the challenges posed by a globalized world, we suggest that the pyramid’s base alternatively consist of the utilitarian perspective or the non-utilitarian perspective as a launch point upon which to build toward a point of decision through analyses of facts, principles/values, and stakeholders/loyalties. See Figure 1.3.

The contributors of this book have applied the revised Point-of-Decision Pyramid Model in their analyses. See Figure 1.4. As the following paragraphs explain, we believe this particular case-study approach will better equip readers and media practitioners to use their moral imaginations to resolve ethical dilemmas, thus avoiding knee-jerk decisions based on personal attitudes and beliefs.

To begin with, moral reasoning always rests upon a philosophical foundation, whether or not the decision maker is aware of it. The base of this “moral reasoning pyramid” in ethical cases represents the philosophical foundation that informs analysis. The decision maker first should consider this foundation as he or she moves from an arrangement of the case facts, through the prioritization of principles, and then to the list of stakeholders—primary, secondary, and tertiary. As in the Potter Box analysis, the decision maker should move from one panel to the next in an effort to come to an informed decision.

First, the case facts give rise to the ethical dilemma by cutting through extraneous details to expose the raw nerve of moral crisis. The gradual exposure of essential facts helps reveal the angst of conflicting moral principles and values. This leads to the second step, the relationship of principles in terms of stakeholders and loyalties. By moving back and forth from the stakeholder panel
to the principles panel—all while constantly considering case facts in the first triangular panel—the competing principles and values become more apparent.

The second triangular panel should list, in order of priority, the principles that emerge from elaboration on the essential facts and careful consideration of the stakeholders. Because of their interchangeability, principles and values are contemplated in the same triangular panel.

The third triangular panel addresses stakeholders and should list, again in rank-order, the prioritization of stakeholders in light of competing rights, claims, and loyalties as facts and competing principles and values in the case become
obvious. Indeed, the initial prioritization of principles in the second panel may require re-evaluation as the analyst poses the following questions when considering stakeholders: (1) Who has the most to gain and who has the least to gain as we move toward the point of decision? (2) Conversely, who has the most and least to lose?

Squarely situated on the foundation of a selected moral philosophy, we spiral upward through the prioritized elements of our triangular panels to the point of moral decision. The goal is to build an ethical structure that will stand after the storm of crisis has passed.
FOR FURTHER ENRICHMENT

1. Study the genealogy of utilitarianism beginning with the basic ideas of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (classical utilitarianism), and continuing with those of Henry Sidgwick (average versus total utilitarianism), G. E. Moore (ideal utilitarianism), Karl Popper (negative utilitarianism), R. M. Hare and Peter Singer (preference utilitarianism), and Robert E. Goodin (welfare utilitarianism). Write a single-spaced, one-page essay that summarizes how utilitarianism has been understood and discussed since the writings of Bentham and Mill. Conclude with your assessment of its suitability as an appropriate philosophical foundation for moral reasoning.

2. Compare Kant’s categorical imperative with Mill’s utilitarianism. Discuss the core differences and similarities between the two approaches. What are the reasons Kant’s moral reasoning is or is not ultimately utilitarian?

3. Read the preface and make a list of the non-Western or non-dominant Western philosophies presented in this anthology. Discuss at least two other non-Western or non-dominant philosophical approaches the authors might have selected to analyze their case studies. How would these alternative philosophies have prioritized the seven principles of the Point-of-Decision Pyramid Model compared with utilitarianism?
CHAPTER 2

A SEMANTIC PATCHWORK OF ETHICAL THEORY

JOHN C. MERRILL

Ethical theory is nothing more than a matter of semantics. Various conceptual dichotomies to look at macro theories of ethics, such as deontological versus teleological, individual versus social, and egoistic versus altruistic, are not as stable and clear cut as they appear to be. Similarly, because most journalists’ ethical dilemmas lie not in obvious matters, such as telling lies and taking bribes, but in semantic problems associated with messages they produce, “general semantics”—an orientation that delves into the importance of language in influencing thought and action—will help communicators use language carefully and help avoid misleading their audiences. Unfortunately, the semantic map of micro theories (such as feminist ethics, discourse ethics, dialogic ethics, egoistic ethics, libertarian ethics, existentalist ethics, situation ethics, virtue ethics, and social contract theory), which have sprung from macro theories of ethics, is quite chaotic. Therefore, we can never really know when we are being ethical.

Ethical theory is more a matter of semantics than anything else, as the meanings of the various philosophical terms involved turn the whole business of foundational concepts into a crazy patchwork of esoteric questions and disagreements. So while this chapter is supposed to deal with ethical theory, it actually deals largely with semantic problems.

This book presents all kinds of morally loaded terms and obscure labels that purport to provide clarity to the entire ethical landscape. However, they usually are ill-defined, highly subjective, and do as much to hide meaning as to lead to a common understanding. Particularly troublesome is the rather recent concept (or is it theory?) of communitarianism, explicated in the next chapter. It simply overpowers one with its semantic noise. Scholars such as Clifford G. Christians have struggled mightily to give this community-oriented concept some special clarity beyond broad-based social theory. Yet the concept remains wrapped in esoteric and sometimes turgid language, as well as semantic obscurity. Consequences, of course, are important to every action. Just how “good” some of them are is debatable. Most all extant theories of ethics are community based, socially relevant, and humanistic. Perhaps the main exception
would be the highly egoistic, Machiavellian, self-aggrandizement ethics of a narcissistic sociopath.\textsuperscript{133} Even this type of person might make a case for self-interest being reconcilable or compatible with public interest. At any rate, the meaning of good consequences—the hallmark of utilitarianism, a consequence-based theory propounded by John Stuart Mill—will become less debatable if we can determine how to define “good.”

Then we are greeted by a plethora of moralistic and vague terms like altruism and narcissism, absolutism and relativism, tribalism and individualism, authoritarianism and libertarianism, communalism and isolationism, legalism and relativism, conservativism and liberalism, monism and pluralism, and personalism and professionalism. How do we wrap these various concepts—these “isms”—into neat little theoretical packages that are definitive and understandable? Does not the liberal try to “conserve” his or her liberalism? Does not the individual rely on the “tribe” for social comfort and protection? Does not the altruist insist on his or her definition of service? Does not one serve others by taking care of and assuming responsibility for oneself?

Complicating this theoretical picture, we hear more and more about feminist ethics, dialogic ethics, discourse ethics, instinctive or intuitive ethics, rational ethics and irrational ethics, pragmatic ethics and humanistic ethics, prescriptive ethics and antinomian ethics, existential ethics, normative ethics and metaethics. Then there are the esoteric, non-Western ethical systems like the sub-Saharan “palaver tree”—a kind of indigenous democratic theory based on collective communication in the shade of the village baobab trees.\textsuperscript{134} It is reminiscent of Jürgen Habermas’s discourse ethics.\textsuperscript{135} Such theories owe significant credit to Martin Buber, whose ethics was relational, stressing an I-thou interactive emphasis, certainly a communitarian stance.\textsuperscript{136} In addition, there is Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, along with various systems that stress gentleness, kindness, and the elimination of social friction. Then there are the religious moral systems of Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam, all of which have a community-concern core. On and on we could go through this semantic patchwork jungle. One recent article is indicative of a cross-culturally shifting expansion of the ethical base.\textsuperscript{137} So what is happening is that the variety of micro theories of ethics increasingly overlaps and expands. Before trying to find a way out of this complex semantic thicket, perhaps a closer look at three of the major macro theories is in order.

**MACRO ETHICS**

The semantic problem raises its head again. What generally is meant by macro ethics is the overarching systems under which many micro ethical
components are found. They are predominant concepts that tend to spawn lesser ones. The 2006 edition of this book tended to look at the big binary theories of (1) utilitarian ethics and (2) communitarian ethics. This typology is in my mind inadequate, but it could be that with semantic stretching, it could prove helpful. In the first edition of this book, I went along with this dichotomous typology, calling my chapter “Utilitarian vs. Communitarian Ethics.” I discussed utilitarianism, while Christians dealt mainly with communitarianism—just as he does in this edition. Social networking is, of course, an important part of communitarianism. It is, by the social ethicists, a positive social endeavor and normally is promoted as democratic and conducive to freedom. A Newsweek article by Niall Ferguson makes the interesting point that “social networks might promote democracy, but they also empower the enemies of freedom.” One example given was an online magazine published by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula that aims to inspire jihadists in the West. It publishes bomb-making instructions and target lists of individuals against whom fatwahs have been proclaimed.

DEONTOLOGICAL/TELEOLOGICAL

The standard and better known of the macro theories are (1) deontological (legalistic) or principle-oriented ethics, and (2) teleological (consequence) ethics. Immanuel Kant is primarily associated with the first and J.S. Mill with the second. Moses may be considered among the very first deontological ethicists. In my opinion, the problem with this typology is that Kant’s and Moses’ a priori principles stem from a tradition or authority (social mores, parents, or God) in which the maxim is determined after considering the positive consequences of following such a maxim. Therefore, Kant’s legalism is based on teleology, a consideration of the consequences. Kant believed that one could form his or her own maxim by applying what is known as the “categorical imperative”: Do only those things you would want to see universalized. Of course, the problem with Mill’s consequence ethics is that bringing happiness or even material aid is not always the best action, though it may seem so in the short run.

INDIVIDUAL/SOCIAL

I find a different binary classification of “mega ethics” more meaningful: (1) individual ethics and (2) social ethics. I know there are semantic problems with these terms as well, but I think they best cover the entire broad field of ethics. The modern tendency is to embrace increasingly social ethics, which devalues the individual and enthrones the collective, the community, the country,
or the culture. Social ethics seeks what is best or good for society, or as communitarians say, for the community.

It is, of course, a form of utilitarian ethics in that it considers the consequences—the happiness or good—for the group. It might even be considered a form of Kantian ethics in that the ethical actors recognize and follow rules and principles, these being authority-based, even if the authority is some kind of citizens’ council. Certainly social ethics is more in line with communitarianism and altruism and focuses on group welfare rather than individual progress. Individual ethics, however, focuses on the person—the individual. It is unlike communitarianism and other types of social ethics. Let me quote briefly from the foreword to Christians’ chapter on communitarianism: “Cliff Christians…argues for a communitarian ethic, which currently offers the most powerful alternative to utilitarianism. He reminds the reader that a communitarian ethics does not reject selfhood but rather reorients it to community.”

This is a helpful clarifying statement, non-deprecating of individualism, that “reorients it (selfhood) to community.” Yet does not this still “subordinate” it to community? That communitarians stress the importance of the group over the individual is quite clear. For example, Christians contrasts communitarian ethics, which is “grounded in social, deliberative democracy,” with J. S. Mill’s utilitarian ethics, which is rooted in an “individualistic political philosophy.” There seems little doubt that communitarianism is a popular theory—as it is altruistic and “other-directed”—and seems more in line with traditional notions of ethical behavior.

**EGOISTIC/ALTRUISTIC**

Yet another dichotomy exists between (1) *egoistic ethics* and (2) *altruistic ethics*. Altruists argue that people have an innate moral obligation to help and benefit others while sacrificing their resources and expecting no return for their act. On the other hand, there is the ethics of self-interest, a belief that when one develops a self-directed ethics, relying on self and accepting personal responsibility; this personal stance is contagious and affects the society. One genre of individual ethics is what many call “egoistic” ethics. Here it is primarily concerned with self-aggrandizement and defending self against the conformity of the group. Such egoistic ethics, often associated in recent times with Ayn Rand, is problematic. It is usually said that it cannot be advocated without inconsistency. Anyone who publicly advocates it is being inconsistent. The egoist’s action in recommending egoism—the promotion of one’s own self-interest—to his fellow is inconsistent with his egoism. The fact that egoism
cannot be recommended with qualification does not mean that egoism itself is inconsistent. One can, in fact, practice egoism without any contradiction whatsoever—so long as they refrain from ever recommending it.

So, with these macro theories briefly stated, this discussion turns to the basic term “ethics,” which is problematic in itself. From there, a number of micro ethics—subordinate mini theories of ethics—will be addressed. All of the discussion in this chapter deals with what philosophers call “metaethics”—talk about the nature and theories of ethics.

**The Puzzling Nature of Ethics**

One reason that “theories” of ethics are so difficult and entangled is that the term “ethics” is shrouded in semantic fog. Few would disagree with the proposition that it is a social benefit for journalists to be moral or ethical. Yet when students, scholars, and professionals talk about ethics, are they trying to define a journalist, or an act of the journalist? Surely an act is not the journalist. One might do what some consider an ethical act, but does that make one an ethical journalist? It is doubtful, just as being happy at certain times under certain circumstances does not make one a “happy person.” In fact, such a person might be generally unhappy. Ditto for ethics. Other questions: Can Actor A do one thing and Actor B do another, and both be ethical? Where do people get their ethical principles and how do they know they are correct? Are ethical standards democratically determined, or are they received from some authoritative source—metaphysical or naturalistic?

Ethics usually is considered a branch of philosophy that considers the rightness or wrongness of actions. What should one do? That is the question of ethics. At least, what is the best thing that can be done? But then there is the problem of defining “best.” That is where various theories prefer to either have Kantian principles to follow, or try to determine what is “best” by considering the consequences. Such answers, however, are never quite satisfactory, and the average person is left hanging, uncertain, in a kind of ethical limbo.

People may want ethics to be objective, certain, scientific, and unerring. But this cannot be. Ethics is a “subjective” enterprise. They force the actor at every turn to make personal decisions or rely on someone else’s choices, to decide between or among alternatives, and to hope for the best. People want their actions to be just and fair. But what is “just”? And what is “fair”? People want their ethical actions to promote goodness and happiness. But what is “goodness” and “happiness”? For the most part, the ethicists cannot provide firm answers to questions such as these.

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People want absolute answers, yet are aware that they cannot be forthcoming. So they charge away, with their instincts, emotions, and biases plunging them into ethical decisions, perhaps in disagreement with their colleagues. To illustrate the point, here is some dialogue from a chapter I did for an earlier book:

FIRST REPORTER. They claim that they won’t ever release the hostages if we report the kidnapping to the public.
SECOND REPORTER. I think that the kidnappers are bluffing. What we ought to do is call their bluff and put out the story. This will cause them to release the hostages so that they can get out of the country before they are captured.
FIRST REPORTER. You can’t be sure of that. We should do what they request. On the whole, it is best to do whatever kidnappers request. In the past things have worked out better when their demands have been met than they have when their demands were not.\(^{149}\)

The second reporter bases his ethical decision—what ought to be done—on what he or she expects the *consequences* of the action to be. The first reporter bases his or her ethical decision on a *principle*, or a rule, to the effect that under such circumstances it is best to meet the culprit’s demands. Unlike the second reporter, the first reporter does not try to base his or her intended action upon expectations regarding the consequences.

Then there are the *emotivists*, who claim that ethical words are simply a subset of the class of evaluative terms. In addition to ethical terms, this class contains aesthetic terms, such as beautiful, pretty, sublime, ugly, grand, heroic, and disgusting. When people say things like “That’s good,” “That’s bad,” “He is a good human being,” and “That’s the right thing to do,” all they are doing is expressing their feelings about some other person, thing, or action. This certainly points to a subjective ethics. What emotivists are saying is that nothing is good in the sense that things are three inches long or red. Matters of value are nonobjective.

Like *existentialists*, emotivists contend there are no yardsticks for determining values. The personal relativist holds that what is valuable is what the individual decides is valuable. The cultural relativist claims that what is valuable is what the society legislates to be valuable. Both concepts, of course, are subjective. Ethics, then, is a largely undefined field. It encompasses a varied patchwork of theories and subtheories—some largely subjective (Millian) and others somewhat rational (Kantian). However, the former is morphing into the latter and vice versa. I maintain that there is no pure legalistic ethics and no pure consequential ethics. In an earlier book, I coined a word, “deontelic” ethics, to
indicate the fusion of Kantian and Millian perspectives—deontological and teleological.\textsuperscript{150} I maintain that people who are concerned about ethics usually begin with following laws or principles, then as they mature and understand moral complexity, they increasingly abandon many of the rules and try to act so as to bring the best consequences.

The journalist is confronted with almost hourly ethical decisions, especially if he or she remains recognizable in the midst of citizen journalism. What should be communicated? What should be avoided? Which sources are revealed and which go unidentified? Which aspects of a story are emphasized and which are played down? When should old stories be resurrected? When, if ever, is journalistic bias acceptable? What kinds of information or material should be left out of a story? On and on go the ethical problems that journalists face.

Contrary to general ethical emphases, many journalistic quandaries do not spin around such factors as lies, propaganda, falsified expense accounts, accepting government travel, cropping photos, fabricating statements from sources, and other largely obvious unprofessional acts. They involve the messages themselves, with the inherent semantic problems that present a discordant and unrealistic picture. Semantic “noise”—the natural penchant for misunderstanding in messages—is where many of the journalist’s ethical problems lie. This gets us into the area of “general semantics,” an orientation that delves into the importance of language and its influence on thought and action.\textsuperscript{151} It is a basic, yet often overlooked, component in journalistic ethics—the meaning entrenched in the formulation of the message itself.

**LANGUAGE: SEMANTICS AND ETHICS**

Since journalists work in a field of language, words are of great importance to them—or they should be. What do journalists “mean” when they write about “liberals in the Senate” or “lawbreakers among the recent immigrants”? Journalists try to develop “maps” that represent the real territory or event. Serious journalists want to create accurate maps, never presenting just territorial lines, but as detailed a “map” as possible. Journalistic language requires precision and constant vigilance. It requires linguistic sophistication and a love for the basic tool of communication—the word. Misusing language and creating misunderstanding are ethical anathemas to the serious reporter. Writers of columns and editorials, as well as advertising writers, enjoy a bit more latitude. Yet for those Kantians who respect the importance of truth, journalists who mislead usually are considered to reside in the dark corners of ethics.
General semantics (GS) can help communicators use language more carefully and thereby have a positive impact on thought and action. A subgenre of linguistics and a first-cousin of “semantics,” GS goes beyond the simple concern for meaning. It gets into the capacity of words to develop thought patterns and ultimately affect actions.

**KORZYBSKIAN SEMANTICS**

Alfred Korzybski (1879–1950), a Polish count who came to the United States shortly after World War I broke out, is considered the “father of general semantics.” He first taught it outside a Connecticut university and later in various parts of the nation. In time, GS made its way into a number of universities, but has never been a standard course. Korzybski’s basic book on the subject[^152] is not an easy read. Yet many writers have provided “translations” of the book, including S. I. Hayakawa, Stuart Chase, Wendell Johnson, Charlotte Read, J. S. Bois, and Irving Lee.

Over some twenty-five years of teaching journalism at the University of Missouri, I found that one of the courses graduate students found most valuable was “General Semantics for the Journalist.” It was taught mainly by Earl English, and later by Don Ranly. I always tried to inject some lectures on GS in many of the courses I taught.

What are the main principles of GS? I will offer some of them briefly, and some readers may think they are just “common sense.” But as Korzybski was fondly saying, common sense is not that common[^153]. By thinking about these principles, journalists can improve their use of language greatly and—as has been noted quite often—can ensure a greater degree of ethics, whether they seek good consequences, or follow a maxim of accuracy and truth-telling.

**MAIN GENERAL SEMANTICS PRINCIPLES**

The following ten GS principles are especially useful for the journalist:

1. Recognize the concept of “flux,” the fact that everything changes. Things, institutions, and people change constantly. But the words that describe them remain basically static.
2. Avoid confusing a label with reality. “The word is not the thing.” “The map is not the territory.”
3. Avoid the assumption that everything has been said about everything. There is always an “et cetera.” There is always more to say about anything.
4. Avoid verbal simplification. “Pete Roberts is a lawyer.” He is much more than that.

[^152]: Footnote reference to the book by Korzybski
[^153]: Footnote reference to the common sense notion
5. Avoid stereotyping. Individualize. Arab No. 1 is not Arab No. 2.
6. Stay low on the abstraction ladder. Collie is better than dog; mutt is better than collie.
7. Distinguish among reports, inferences, and judgments. Report: John Doe, age sixty-six, was sentenced to ten years in prison yesterday. Inference: He will soon be in prison. Judgment: John Doe is an evil and dangerous person.
8. Have a multivalued orientation, not a two-valued one. Think and write on “a spectrum,” not in definite classes. Avoid such concepts as “tall” and “short,” “rich” and “poor,” “small” and “large,” and “liberal” and “conservative.”
9. Recognize the subjectivity of descriptive adjectives. Realize that when a person says, “That is a beautiful girl,” that says nothing about her. Such a comment only reflects that person’s concept of feminine beauty.
10. Journalists must recognize their natural tendency toward bias. Such preferences and predispositions affect the balance and objectivity of one’s writing or speaking.154

THE PATCHWORK OF THEORIES

Beyond the semantic problems with journalism ethics are the many sub-theories that spin off the mega theories mentioned earlier. Even these mini theories are plagued with fuzziness in their meaning. In considering some of those, one should note their overlapping nature and semantic dysfunction.

One of the recent ethical typologies is feminist ethics. Several ethicists have tagged feminism as a special genre of concern. To me it is unnecessary. Ethics in any of its raw essences would seem to include both genders. Why should feminist ethics be studied any more than masculine ethics? Feminizing ethics only provides a means to emphasize gender differences and a separation of human values. Feminist ethicists would say that my comments above stem from my being a man. Feminist writers see women having a different ethical stance from that of men, one that is more subjective, compassionate, and emotive, and one that tends to be selfless and largely voiceless.155 Peaceful resolution of conflict and emphatic actions toward others highlight feminist ethics. A good guide to feminist theory is Women’s Ways of Knowing, which takes the reader through the various stages of moral evolution from voices that are “silent” to those that are “fully integrated.”156 Feminist ethics seems to center on women getting a louder and more frequent voice in the moral dialogue.
Another micro theory is *discourse ethics*, which is based on dialogic (speech action) or discourse theory.\textsuperscript{157} Here, the emphasis is that ethical decisions are reached after knowledgeable, interested, and communicative parties talk together. They converse about right actions, and often this is referred to as *dialogic ethics*.\textsuperscript{158} Perhaps it is a theory, but to me this simply appears to be a mechanism often used in social theory for the purpose of democratizing ethics. At any rate, it is a type of community-oriented or altruistic ethics. In its genre are sub-Saharan “palaver” ethics and Asian systems such as Confucianism, founded by Confucius, with its ritualistic social implications, and that of his disciple, Mencius, who visualized a kind of social “contract” between rulers and the people.

Then, there are *statist ethics*, such as that of G. W. F. Hegel, who saw the state—the very “spirit” of the people—as the undergirding moral foundation to society.\textsuperscript{159} In addition, there are various versions of Marxism, an extreme social theory that envisions an ultimate communitarianism where the state eventually withers away. A more moderate form of group-oriented ethics has been proposed by many scholars who stress a conversational development of ethical norms,\textsuperscript{160} and by German scholar Hans Jonas, who emphasizes social responsibility.\textsuperscript{161} At any rate, communitarian theory is an important “social” theory and at its heart is conversation or discourse theory based on responsible decision making.

As idealistic as community-oriented ethics is, there is a natural barrier against it becoming too dominant for very long. As I stated in my recent book *Farewell to Freedom*:

Human beings, although not as hardworking and cooperative as ants, do manifest similar social affinity and are drawn to collectives for safety and freedom from a myriad of traumatic choices. However, unlike ants, individuals with their ambitions and impulses continue to threaten the harmony of their communities.\textsuperscript{162}

*Egoistic*, or *individualistic*, ethics, often roughly connected with Machiavellian ethics,\textsuperscript{163} intrudes itself into many of these micro theories. It is
especially anathema to communitarianism in that it de-emphasizes the group and enthrones the individual. What do I think? How do I feel? What do I want? Related to egoistic ethics in this patchwork are emotive ethics, instinctive ethics, whim ethics, and intuitive ethics—all highly subjective. Applying the God-induced love called agape to a moral dilemma is another subjective approach. They are all non-rational and generate ethical action from some deep, hidden naturalistic internal source. “I just felt I should do it,” the person says. Why? “I don’t know.” It is evident that many of the journalist’s spur-of-the-moment decisions are of this nature. This is not to assume that they are wrong, however.

Libertarian/authoritarian ethics is another pattern in the mix. Both terms, semantically troublesome, probably have spawned more debate and analysis than any other pair of words. They are related to individualist and social ethics, as well as open and closed systems of ethics. The libertarian’s ethical directives come from within, as exemplified by existentialists. They are not imposed by some outside force or authority, as with Plato’s philosopher-king. The authoritarian’s ethical norms, contrary to those of libertarians, are derived from a feared or highly respected source. Other binary terms similar to those above are self-directed/legalistic (duty-bound), egoistic/altruistic, and active (existentialist)/passive.

Contextual, or situation, ethics is often contrasted to absolute, or universal, ethics. Most books in the West emphasize ethics in the European context. Then there are a number of non-Western ethical perspectives. Scholars who edited and contributed to this book have noted that many Western approaches to ethics “fall short when applied to the reality of our complex and multicultural world.” Why? Because Western approaches focus on freedom and the individual, thereby shortchanging “considerations of community and responsibility.” It seems to me that this situation is natural and really not harmful. If various countries want to provide their own ethical approaches, which generally ordain controlled action and a monolithic society, they should not be condemned for doing so. It could be that our Western ethical emphasis does not “fall short,” but is simply appropriate for our societies.

A sense of self-worth and personal responsibility highlights what is often called virtue ethics, which stem from the moral ideas of Aristotle. Journalists who desire self-enhancement and maximum freedom used in an ethical manner naturally are drawn to Aristotelian ethics, a form of libertarian and egoistic morality. Presenting a positive view of life and stressing a vision of the virtuous and happy person, Aristotle—like Confucius—thought that a life of sustained seeking of the good and just would result in virtue. Aristotle touted self-worth and personal happiness. He felt that a rational pride in oneself and in
one’s moral character is necessary, understanding that people become virtuous or ethical—and thereby truly happy—by habitually acting in good faith. As a violinist learns to be a skillful musician, people learn virtue through practice, habit, and repetition. Aristotle writes of the “golden mean,” emphasizing a concern for proper balance and moderation. For him, moral excellence is a rough midpoint between two kinds of badness—excess (too much) and deficit (too little). His ethical view differed somewhat from that of his teacher, Plato, who saw individuals as people who adapt to the group and perform special duties to contribute to the overall social benefit. Virtue ethics significantly reflects the teachings of Jesus. It is a theory that “addresses how human beings are to be in the world, that is, what kind of values should they hold, strive for, and seek to embody.” The field of virtue ethics began in earnest with the work of Aristotle and later was popularized by Thomas Aquinas. Their major themes, following Jesus’ teachings, have permeated to some degree all of Western ethical theory. Loving one another is a key concept in this ethical stance.

Another ethical sub theory is social contract theory. It links ethics to the state or to a society. The citizens volunteer to accept socially enforced rules of conduct. The state organizes social and moral expectations of society specifically. Writers such as Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, Karl Marx, and socialists in general are identified closely with this theory. More recently, John Rawls has proposed that “free and rational people must assume a position of equality in determining the terms of their association.” Further, participants in such a contract are to be behind what Rawls calls “a veil of ignorance” so that agreed-upon principles will be just. It is a semantically difficult theory and flies in many directions, but it became quite popular at the end of the 20th century.

One ethical concept, which is perhaps not even a sub-theory, is concerned about the propagation of messages. It is known as “transparency,” or being openly accountable to the public. Recently it has been highly recommended as part of the path to “professional media.” If journalism became a profession, or at least more professional, this would resolve many of ethics’ amorphous areas and undoubtedly hold media to basic standards. If the public knew the background of a reporter’s research and writing, this surely would be important to the reporter and the audience member.

**A Summing Up**

Some readers will say that many theories and subtheories were ignored in this chapter. Certainly some theories were left out or at least de-emphasized. This occurred either through oversight, or by purposeful elimination or de-
emphasis. Enough is enough. The tangled web of ethical concepts and theories that form a semantic patchwork of moral thinking is complex enough without adding often-synonymous systems and mini theories. The macro theories have been given, and many other ways of looking at ethics have been briefly discussed.

It is my feeling that two macro theories—individualist ethics and social ethics—are the primary foundations of moral thinking. One can approach ethics as self-determined, or society-determined. Related to this approach, one can view ethics as self-enhancement, or as social-enhancement. It is the I-thou relationship that Buber wrote so much about. It is the egoistic-altruistic emphasis that egoists like Rand and altruistic communitarians such as Christians support.

Also important to me are the dualistic ethical positions taken by G. W. F. Hegel and Søren Aabye Kierkegaard. The former stresses the importance of the state as authority. The latter places the existentialist emphasis on the individual person. Another binary consideration is to either follow Kantian, pre-determined rules, or make Millian decisions based on consequences. Of course, there are others. As this chapter pointed out, theories and subtheories abound. New ones emerge every day. Many, perhaps all, of them are difficult to understand, and the fact that they merge, mingle, and overlap adds to their semantic vagueness.

You shake your head and mumble: “So what should I believe? How do I know when I am being ethical?”

You do not know. And you will never know for sure. Just sit back and enjoy the intricate patchwork formed by the entanglements of the semantic jungle.

FOR FURTHER ENRICHMENT

1. Make the case that contextual, or relative, ethics is more realistic than universal ethics.

2. Briefly describe communitarian ethics and discuss why it is sometimes considered a danger to freedom of the press.

3. What is the relationship between the categorical imperative and the golden rule? Who was the formulator of each?

4. What are some of the weaknesses of the utilitarian ethical theory?
5. For the journalist, what would be meant by the saying “No man steps in the same river twice”? Give a journalistic example of how this could be applied.

6. Why would a code of ethics, such as that used by the Society of Professional Journalists, be more restrictive than instinctive or existential ethics?
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