

## Components of communication ethics: A critical inquiry

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### Abstract

This paper primarily draws on a fusion of important concepts from moral philosophy, media practice and critical thinking to arrive at components of communication ethics. It attempts to show how communication ethics model differs from the usual communication model. In the process of establishing the above premises, the paper dwells on topics like the relationship of communication to ethics, ethical dilemma, ethics and morality, a brief history of ethics, the three branches of ethics, ethical behaviour of media practitioners, strategies to counter intrusion and finally on the subject of truth as the only objective of communication ethics.

**Keywords:** Communication, Ethics, Model Media Ethics Specifics, Strategies to Counter Truth-disruption

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### Introduction

"Media ethics" is often considered a hopeless enterprise or a frivolous academic pursuit as ethics seems to matter less and less in the conduct of media matters. Public opinion polls continue to show that media professionals are held in low esteem. For instance, advertising executives are criticized for manipulating a vulnerable public. Public relations practitioners are depicted as representing special interests and disseminating disinformation to the detriment of the public interests. The entertainment industry stands accused in the court of public opinion of marketing gratuitous sex and violence to the nation's emotionally susceptible youth. Contemporary world faces unprecedented crises: a global economic downturn, mass poverty, environmental degradation, militarism and the ever-onward rise of authoritarianism to name but a few. Even in the face of evidence of a general decline in ethical standards augmenting all around us, advocates of media ethics are generally but painfully familiar with the deriding looks of amusement making the speaker feel a little denigrated. In order to tackle these issues we need to engage in dialogue, to communicate well, to break down the divisions and encourage understanding rather than hatred. And we need to act creatively to inspire new ways of communicating. This paper offers a respectful dissent from this cynical view of the value of Ethics within the public academy. Scepticism about instilling ethical values produces scepticism about moral responsibility, and this in turn produces leaders who lack moral vision. In fact, the need for renewed emphasis on ethics education has never been greater.

### Objective

This paper primarily draws on a fusion of important concepts from moral philosophy, media practice and critical thinking to arrive at components of communication ethics. It attempts to show how communication ethics model differs from the usual communication model. In the process of establishing the above premises, the paper dwells on topics like ethical dilemma, ethics and morality, a brief history of ethics, the three branches of ethics, ethical behaviour of media practitioners, strategies to counter intrusion and finally on the subject of truth as the only objective of communication ethics.

### Ethical Dilemma

Ethical dilemmas involve moral struggles and reflection in an effort to do the right thing. Ethical dilemmas engage the conscience, which must frequently act in response to two or more competing and morally tenable courses of action. Ethical dilemmas are all around us and they are woven into the fabric of everyday life, persistently challenging our ethical sensibilities. Consider, for example, the following question: Can one accept a film CD from someone illegally downloaded, when to do so implicitly validates his/her behaviour? Is it ethically permissible for a TV reporter to use a hidden camera to document unlawful activity or scandalous behaviour? Does Hollywood have moral obligation to refrain from depictions of gratuitous sex and violence? Is physician assisted suicide a moral affront to the sanctity of life? Most of us could probably provide an answer to such questions based on our feelings about an issue. But could we defend our decision based upon some established ethical principle? This is what the study of ethics is all about - learning to justify publically our ethical choices based upon sound ethical precepts. Through the teaching of ethical principles and moral reasoning, educational institutions can fulfil one of their historically important responsibilities, the "cultivation of morality" (Stiles xi).

### Ethics and Morality

This will lead us to the question of what exactly is Ethics, and how it differs from morals. The word "moral" is derived from the Latin *mos, moris*, meaning "way of life", "conduct". It is often associated with religious beliefs and personal behaviour. The term "ethics", on the other hand, is derived from the Greek *ethos*, meaning "character", "custom", or "usage". It is often thought of as a rational process of applying established principles when two moral obligations collide. The most difficult ethical dilemmas occur when conflicts arise between two "right" moral obligations. Thus ethics often involves in the balancing of competing rights when there is no "correct" answer.

### **The Semantic Alliance between Ethics and Morality**

Despite the historical distinctions between morals and ethics, in recent years, many commentators have merged the two concepts in the term "moral philosophy" to mean a study that deals with the moral component of human life. This semantic alliance between ethics and morals reflects the approach used in the paper. This strategy is particularly useful in the study of media ethics because it reflects the growing realisation that professional ethical behaviour cannot be divorced entirely from the moral standards of society at large. For instance, a public relations practitioner who deliberately distorts truth is violating a fundamental principle that has its genesis both in the moral systems of various religious and ancient ethical canons. Hence, Ethics concerns itself with the evolution and application of those moral values that a particular society or culture has accepted as its norms.

### **History of Ethics**

The study of ethics in the western world possibly commenced nearly 2,500 years ago when Socrates roamed Greece probing and challenging his brethren's ideas about such abstract concepts as justice and goodness. This Socratic method of enquiry, consisting of relentless questions and answers about the nature of moral conduct, has proved to be the durable commodity continuing to touch off heated discussions of morality in barrooms and classrooms alike. Thus the primary ingredient of ethical debate is conflict, because even within a given society or culture opinions can differ on standards of proper moral conduct. This moral diversity can be intellectually stimulating and personally enriching.

### **Ethical Behaviour of Media Practitioners**

The study of ethics in mass communications is a noble heir to the Socratic tradition, because the activities of journalists, advertisers, and public relations executives are being subjected to critical inquiry as never before, even among their fellows. We are in a constant state of agitation about the moral dimensions of our lives. We are aware of the real and important difference between actions that are right and those that are wrong. The most challenging ethical dilemmas involve the balancing of competing interests when there is no "right" answer. Ethics education refines our ability to make critical judgements and to defend those decisions on some rational basis. For instance, journalists when delving into others' private lives, often justify their decisions to publish embarrassing revelations on the basis of "the peoples' right to be informed". The problem with this kind of rejoinder is that it doesn't answer the questions of what the people have the right to know and why the public has the right of this kind of information in the first place.

### **The Three Branches of Ethics**

Ethics as a formal field of enquiry attempts to put such questions into perspective, and in so doing, includes three different conceptually related enterprises: meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics.

#### **Meta-ethics**

Meta-ethics is concerned with the study of the characteristics, or nature, of ethics. It also examines the meaning of such abstract terms as good, right, justice, and fairness, and attempts to identify these values that are best moral values. Meta-ethics

is not concerned with making moral judgements but instead, attempts to distinguish ethical values from those that involve merely matters of taste or attitude. It is also the foundation of many media codes and standards of behaviour, but it remains for media practitioners to adapt these rather abstract concepts to specific moral dilemma. Meta-ethics provides the broad foundation for ethical decision making, but it does not provide guideposts for how to get from point A to point B. For instance, when viewers or readers describe a news report as unfair, are they referring to the ethical concern or merely a matter of taste? Similarly, a media critic's description of TV series as "good programme" does not necessarily denote any observations concerning the programmes moral stature. It is the function of Meta-ethics to define such vague concepts in ethical terms, providing precision of meaning so that all members of a society can start with a level playing field in reaching moral judgements.

#### **Normative Ethics**

Normative ethics on the other hand, is concerned with developing general theories, rules and principles of moral conduct. The recent preoccupation with the ethical malaise within our society and the demise of traditional values centres on some of the fundamental societal principles of moral behaviour - that is, normative ethics. These theoretical principles are ethical markers of any civilised society, designed to bring moral order out of chaos and provide the basis for ethical decision making in the real world. Some of society's prohibitions against lying, cheating, and stealing, flow from our concern with normative ethics.

#### **Applied Ethics**

Applied ethics is the problem-solving branch of moral philosophy. The task here is to use the insights derived from Meta-ethics and the general principles and rules of normative ethics in addressing specific ethical issues and concrete cases. Applied ethics is designed to guide through any moral thicket by confronting issues within a real world environment. It helps to find "well-reasoned" answers to confusing ethical dilemmas. Applied ethics is the vital link between theory and practice, the real litmus-test of ethical decision-making. Professional and occupational ethics belong to this branch of ethics.

#### **Fundamental Ethical Elements in Communication**

Communication is an inherently ethical undertaking because the act of communication concerns the use of available resources to convey information, to move, to inspire, to persuade, to enlighten, to connect and so on. Regardless of context, communication event involves choice, reflects values, and has consequences and these three key elements form the basis of its ethical makeup. Ethics provides the framework for identifying and determining available options and for differentiating between morally justified pathways in any given circumstances.

#### **Philosophical Viewpoints in Ethical Communication**

There are three main philosophical viewpoints concerning what precisely is ethical communication like utilitarianism, the categorical imperative and the ethical egoism. An ethical egoist claims that everyone has the right to promote their own self-interest. The limit of an egoist's ethical system ends in himself/herself. The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus could

be considered the first representative of this viewpoint. A good life to him is basically enjoyment, ensuring as much pleasure as possible. John Stuart Mill the British philosopher and economist, shared the Epicurean view that pleasure in life is the only consequence which matters. However, he took exception to Epicurus' preoccupation with self-centred pleasure: for Mill, pleasure is in seeking the greatest happiness for the greatest number. However, Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, took an entirely different approach to ethics. While Epicurus and Mill deliberated on consequences, Kant accentuated on the demands of reason and the moral law. According to him, an act can be judged right or wrong regardless of the outcome.

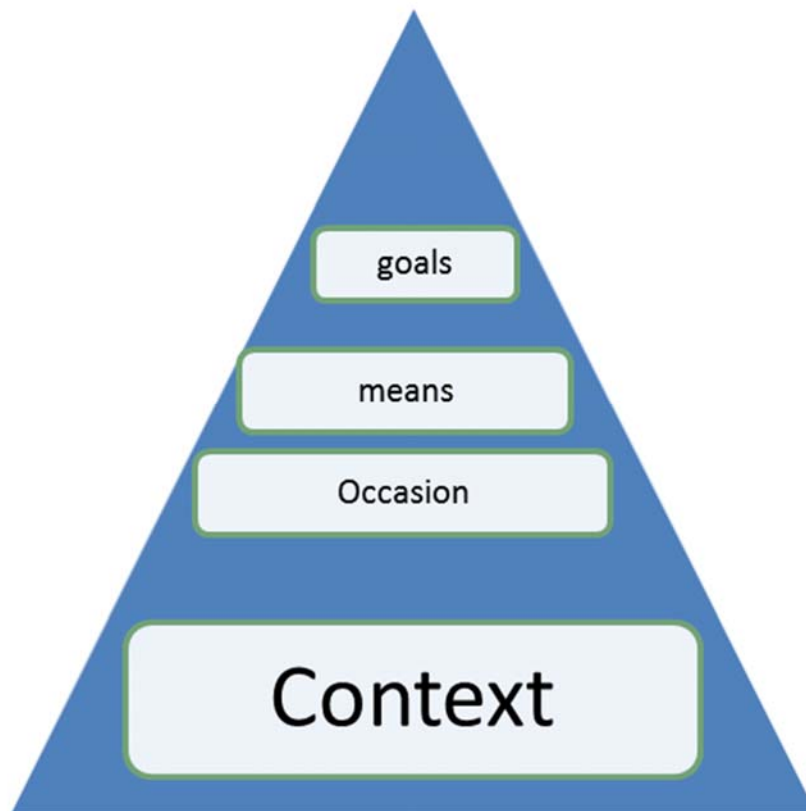
**Contrary Communication Outcomes**

Communication like the basic elements of nature possesses contrary qualities. For instance, unethical communication, throughout history, has been one of humanity's most potentially harmful weapons. In interpersonal contexts, it has the power to thwart healthy human development, to wound deeply, and to undermine connection. It has been used within institutional contexts, to support corruption and greed, to bolster tyranny, and often to foster oppression. Historically, communication has

been instrumental in sparking and justifying economic injustice, violence, war, genocide, and tribal conflicts. On the other hand, the art of communication has been instrumental to the pursuits of truth, justice, and peace. Historically, effective communication has nurtured loving connection, compassion, and understanding. Communication's powers to hurt and to heal, to repress and to inspire, to betray and to uplift, to oppress and to comfort, to deceive and to enlighten, to wound and to mend are among the direct links between communication and ethics.

**Components of Communication Ethics**

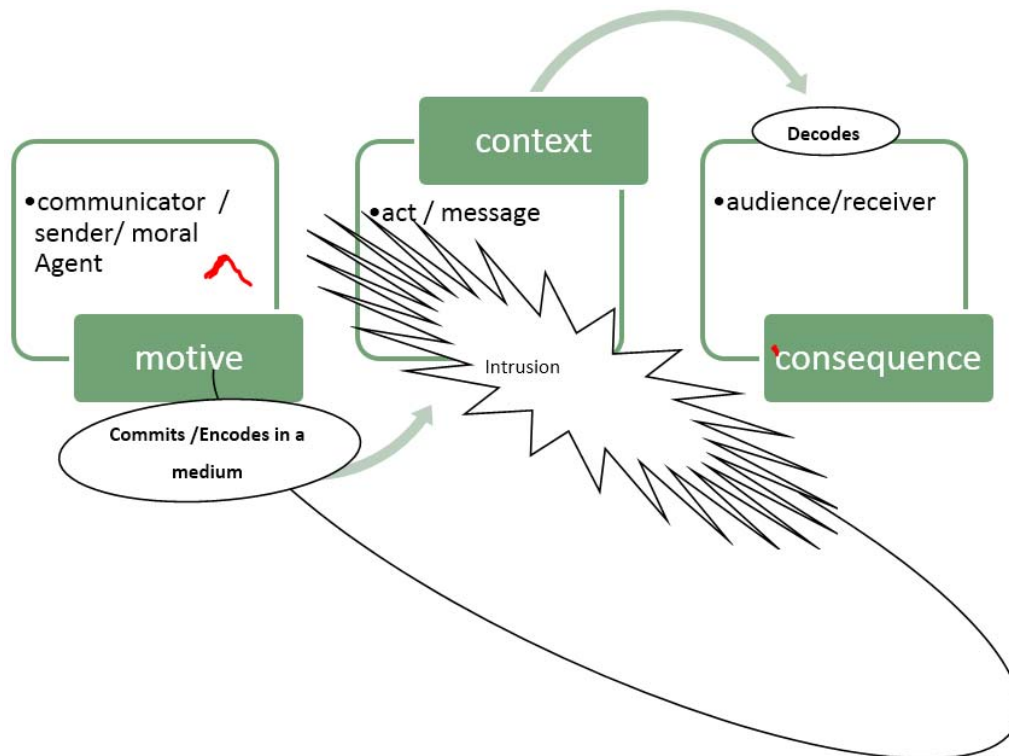
Communication basically is the process of transferring information from the addresser to the addressee. All types of communication - whether the focal point of communication act is individual as in interpersonal, organizational, small group, mass mediated and so on; or whether the key target of the communication event is on the level of conveying ideas as in political, informational, technical, or commercial; whether delivered orally, electronically, verbally or nonverbally, visually, or through a print medium - occurs within a context, including goals, means, and occasion.



Ethical communication demands understanding of and responsiveness to each of these three key elements. The ends of communication, the means/ medium chosen to communicate, and the “real-world” outcomes of communication are particularly important features of ethical communication. Hence like the common model of communication, communication ethics has six components: sender, encoder, medium, decoder, receiver and message. However, it has additional three components like motive, context and

consequence with the possibility of intrusion at every point of communication process.

Any ethical situation can be viewed from the perspective of the communication process graphically represented below. A moral agent/ communicator with a particular motive commits (encodes) in the specificity of a medium) an act/ message (either verbal or moral) with an express context directed at a particular individual / audience who decodes usually with some consequence. Intrusion is an all pervading force that influences every point of the communication process.



### Communicator/ Moral Agents

All communicators become moral agents when they confront the ethical dilemmas of their profession and must bear full responsibility for their actions. Moral agents are the ones who make ethical judgements, regardless of whether they are acting on their own volitions or as institutional representatives.

### Motive

The issue of motive lies in the fact that good motives can sometimes be used to justify what appears to be an unethical act. For instance, a reporter may use deception to uncover governmental corruption. This is a journalistic technique most would be willing to tolerate in the name of public good. Motives must be examined based strictly on their popularity or public acceptability; they should be viewed in relation to the consequences of the action. A moral agent initiates a communication process with a specific intention.

### Context

Ethical decisions are always made within a specific context, which includes the political, social, and cultural climate. Although the context does not necessarily determine the outcome of an ethical judgement, it exerts an influence that cannot be ignored. In fact, contextual factors often create the internal conflict that brings our conscience's admonition of what we ought to do into moral combat with what is the popular thing to do.

### Act

The act is the behavioural component of the communication process. The act may be verbal or non-verbal. It is what draws our attention to the actions of others as either ethical or unethical. In communication ethics act is, first and foremost, linked with choice. To the extent options are available in any given situation, moral agency is at play. With the relative

freedom to choose one's pathway in any given situation comes moral responsibility. For instance, in encounters with strangers, the decision of whether to recoil or to express hostility, on the one hand, or to smile or otherwise express a sense of human connection, on the other, reflects elements of choice and hence also of responsibility. Numerous factors—from customs, cultural norms, and traditions to individual abilities, preferences, genetic makeup, neurophysiology, and many other variables within and outside the individual's control—influence how each person responds to the circumstances he or she confronts.

### Audience

An ethical situation should be evaluated in terms of the moral agent's relationship to the individual or audience most directly affected by the ethical judgement. For instance, an advertiser that markets its products to children might employ less aggressive sales techniques than one that appeals to an adult audience.

### Consequence

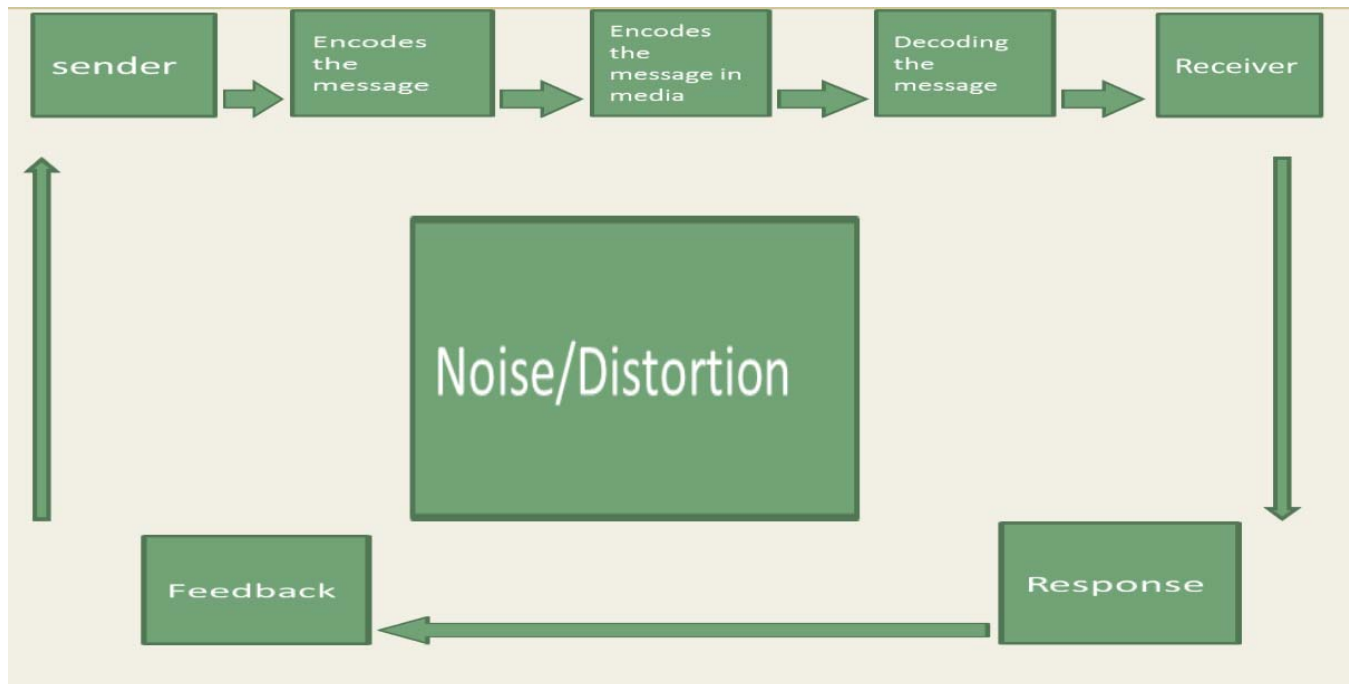
Ethical judgements produce consequences - either positive or negative - for both the moral agent and others who may be touched by the agent's actions. These consequences may range from a stimulation of conscience to public approbation or disapproval of the moral agent's behaviour. Sometime these consequences are instantaneous and unambiguous, as when readers might complain about a graphic photo of charred bodies on the front page of the newspaper. Consequence may also be more subtle and long-term and usually form the foundations of individual and institutional reputations. The concept of 'consequence' also refers to the capacity of representing to oneself many perspectives, viewpoints and layers of meaning concerning a moral issue. Martha Nussbaum (2001) <sup>[14]</sup> and Seyla Benhabib (1992) <sup>[3]</sup> are among the noted scholars who

emphasized the importance of imagining to oneself the experiences and sensibilities of others on any particular set of circumstances. Development of one's moral imagination requires both willingness and an ability to challenge one's "self-centered perspective." by being receptive and responsive to the diverse perspectives.

unable to predict the consequences in advance and act accordingly. As a result, what is anticipated with a bias gets diverged from the expectations of the moral agent. Besides, as the process of moral communication moves from one component to the other, there is always the inevitable influence of many factors which intrude into it.

**Intrusion**

Owing to the intrusion of certain metanarratives - religious, ideological, cultural, ethnological and so on - moral agents are



Ethics in communication could have different components depending on the type of communication: whether it is between persons, in business, whether it concerns international relationships and communication which includes media.

ethical issues in abstract terms. Sometime our moral imagination may need gentle prodding; at other times a shock therapy.

**Strategies to Counter Intrusion**

When intrusion is possible at every point of communication process, moral reasoning become very weak i.e. ethical communication can hardly promote moral conduct by providing the means to make ethical judgements, defend them, and then criticize the result of one's choices. Following the five-pronged strategy drawn from the study published by Hasting Centre a pioneer in the behavioural sciences, we may limit the force of intrusion.

**Identifying Ethical Issues**

Everyone likes to believe that she/he is capable of discretion in matters of right and wrong however unfounded that belief may be. Very often, consciously or otherwise, people allow their prejudices and self-interest to betray their moral compass. Consequently, they fail to recognize the moral dimensions of a situation.

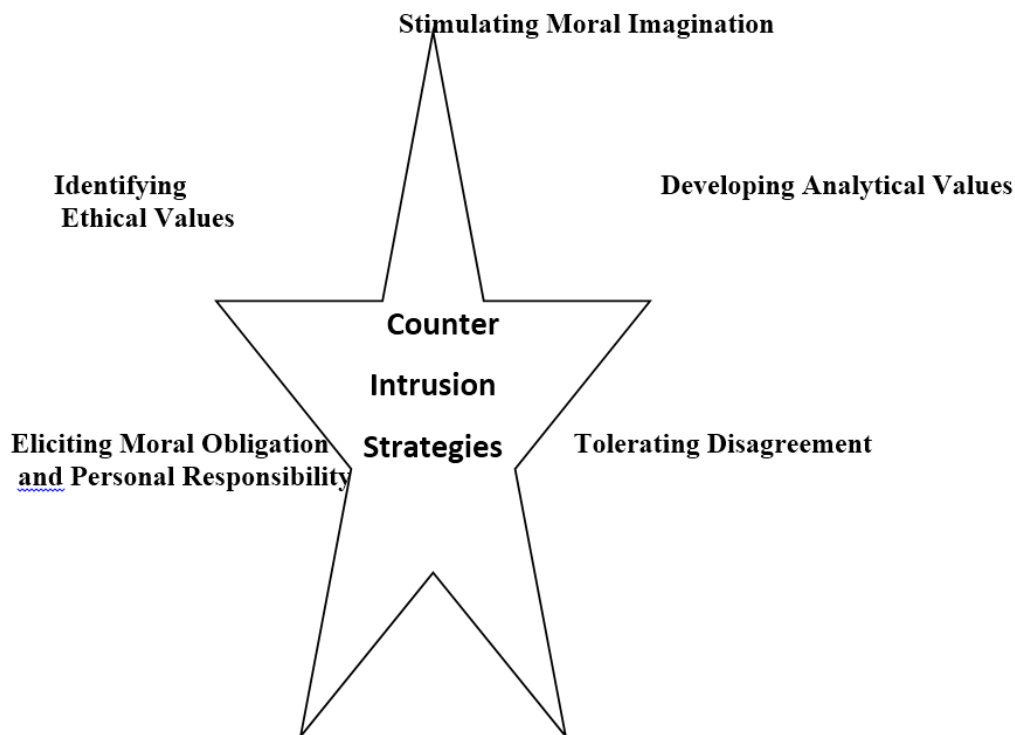
**Stimulating the Moral Imagination**

Modern living affords proliferation of choices and these constitute an important part of human existence. Hence consequences of a decision can either lead to suffering or happiness. Stimulating the moral imagination develops an emotional empathy with others that is not elicited by discussing

**Developing Analytical Skill**

The ability to think critically about ethical issues is at the heart of the decision-making process. This involves examining fundamental concepts such as justice, moral duty and respect for others and relating these coherently to real-life situations. Critical examination of the arguments and justifications one uses to support moral decisions is also an important consideration.





**Eliciting Moral Obligation and Personal Responsibility**

This demands the recognition of a simple moral truth: 'responsibility cannot be delegated'. Moral agents are accountable for their actions and as such cannot blame others for ethical lapses. Media practitioners often emphasize freedom at the expense of responsibility. Developing a sense of moral obligation can redress that imbalance.

**Tolerating Disagreement.**

Informed ethical judgements must take into account other perspectives and point of views. A rational decision is based on a defensible moral foundation, ample deliberation, and consideration of the available options. Tolerating differences in choice and refraining from automatically labelling opposite choices as immoral are essential for a good ethical judgement. Sometimes seeking exact points of difference can help solve disagreements by eliminating pseudo- distinctions. Information explosion today enable moral agents to consider the moral stand of others before rendering their personal judgements.

**Truth as the End of Ethical Communication**

Truth is a fundamental value and ethics attempts to arrive at it through real-life issues, not with the pseudo-claim to be in possession of absolute Truth but to possess the sparks of it in much smaller measure like experiencing Beauty in beautiful forms. Though as human beings we can never arrive at absolute Truth, there are several reasons that civilized society should embrace the commitment to truth as a fundamental principle. One of these is the lack of integrity in human communication which undermines the autonomy of the individual. As rational beings we depend on truthful and accurate information to make informed judgements about a whole host of activities like what products to buy, what TV programmes to watch and even the selection of friends. Because many of our waking hours are spent consuming the visual and auditory stimuli provided by the mass media, we have a right, as autonomous individuals, to

expect media practitioners to behave with some degree of integrity as the rest of the society. When inaccuracies, rumour, and allegations replace truth based upon personal knowledge, evidence, or corroboration, then informed decision making, and thus individual autonomy, is prejudiced.

Another reason for commitment to truth is that it demonstrates a respect for persons as ends rather than as tools to be manipulated. Deception often places self-interest over the interests of others. A lack of veracity in communication process places the recipient of the deceptive information at a competitive disadvantage. Where media practitioners are involved, the problems are magnified, because consumers are either more unlikely to discover the deception than they would be in person or have no way to register their disapproval immediately with any real hope of having an impact. Deception is "parasitic on the social process" (Shibles 19) and constitutes a breach of faith and makes it less likely that relationships based on trust and credibility will succeed in future. The belief in the truthfulness of communications builds trust between individuals and between individuals and society's institutions. Finally truth is essential to the democratic process. Democracy depends on an informed citizenry, one that approaches the political and economic marketplace armed with the knowledge that inspires studious deliberation. In a complex democratic society, the media are the primary conduits of information flow, and to the extent that they do not provide truthful, accurate, and meaningful information, they deprive their audiences of the intellectual nourishment necessary for rational decision-making. The recent trend towards "sound-bite" journalism and the displacement of thoughtful reporting and analysis with sensationalism and triviality of the tabloid media are troubling manifestations of how truth is often vulnerable to the lure of commercial values. Certainly nothing is ethically amiss in the media's appealing to the popular tastes of their audiences. To the extent that the public abandons serious content for banality, they must share the moral responsibility for the depreciation of

democratic values. However, when the media are not faithful to the democratic mandate to service the political and economic system that has provided them sustenance in the first place, they become culturally dysfunctional and deprive the system of its vitality.

Thus, in theory, it would appear that absolute truth is an ideal for which all media practitioners should strive. In practice, however, the application of this principle often depends upon the circumstances and the role of the moral agent. Although outright falsehoods can seldom be justified, exactly how much truth is good for the public depends on the expectations of the people

### **Conclusion: 21st-Century Challenges to Communication Ethics**

In the twenty-first century, people from richly diverse backgrounds, representing varied interests, values and beliefs, routinely encounter one another as a matter of course. Communication technologies have turned cultural boundaries mere "shadow lines" and have delivered to people vast reserves of information and widely divergent perspectives. These circumstances offer unparalleled promise for mutual growth and enlightenment. Consequently, these enable people to question their assumptions, achieve deeper awareness of issues from multiple standpoints and facilitate the "shifting of perspective" which are at the heart of ethical communication. This in turn enriches possibilities for well-reasoned and just decision-making. It is thus that communication in contemporary world offers great promise for fulfilling its constructive and creative potential.

Social critics like Christians (2007) <sup>[4]</sup>, Jonas (1984) <sup>[10]</sup>, Ellul (1964) and quite a few others have elaborated on the numerous challenges that confront humanity while the newly inducted technologies of communication create their own imperatives. Josina M. Makau puts it aptly in her essay, "Ethical and Unethical Communication" thus:

People using communication technologies, for example, often succumb to a kind of instrumentalism, in which "efficiency" is privileged at the expense of relationships, connection, dignity, freedom, and other core values. Surveillance and control, manipulation, and power over others often take precedence when people using technologies acquiesce to this tendency. As machines become more and more sophisticated, it is likely that these risks will become increasingly manifest.

Although mass communication creates valuable opportunities to foster shared understanding, to facilitate peace, to achieve justice, and to serve humanity, its vulnerability for to abuse is too immense. Commercial interests of the few underworld power centres produce news and distribute news at the expense of the many. Hence, access to dependable information may prove more and more difficult. Earlier scrutiny of news items and a studied reflection on them were considered hallmarks of sound reporting. However, today, the speed of information transmission and scant attention to good practices are impediments to reliable reporting. These are besides the availability of enhanced gadgets for managing and manipulating messages. All these have a telling impact on undermining the ability of the agents to discern differences between "truthful" dissemination of information and mere propaganda.

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