

Ethics and Social Responsibility in Business, Communication, and Social Media

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Abstract

Intended to inform and educate students majoring in the Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, this presentation briefly explores the ethical practices in business, communication, social media, and the interplay between machines and humans. In addition, providing definitions and explanations of concepts related to communication that are closely tied to these studies, specifically ethics, morals, law, and corporate social responsibility. Actual business/industry case studies related to these concepts are used to illustrate their significance. In recent years, educational institutions in the United States and elsewhere have increasingly attempted to break the traditional silo mentality between specific areas of learning by encouraging interdisciplinary studies. The goal is to broaden the student's understanding of today's highly interconnected, technology-driven, and complex global business environment.

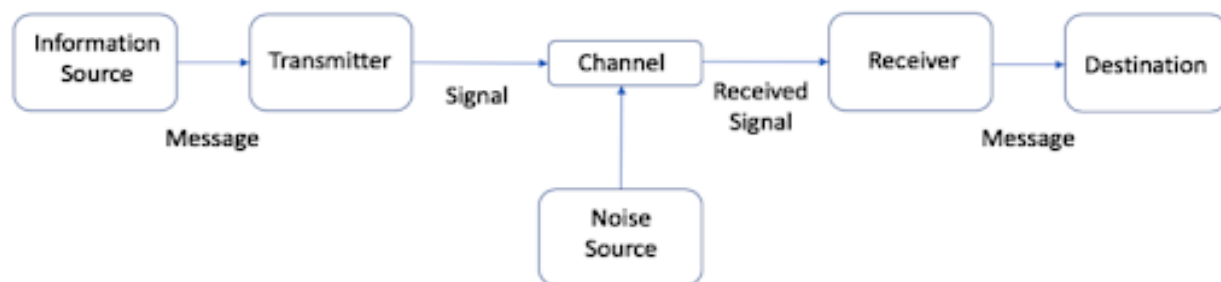
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Ethics and Social Responsibility in Business, Communication, and Social Media

Understanding law and ethics and being able to communicate with a target audience (both verbally and in writing) are essential in any given field. Closely tied with communication law, ethics is a fundamental responsibility in decision-making and developing mutually beneficial relationships with various constituents of a given organization. Every message one conveys should be crafted carefully to accomplish a specific purpose or business goal that is consistent with established legal and ethical standards. To do so, it is important to know the various elements of communication and how they change depending on the medium, content, and messenger.

Communication Process, Elements, and Types:

The best way to introduce the complexity and importance of communication is to introduce its basic model and various components. The following illustration, commonly known as the 1949 Shannon and Weaver Mathematical Model, represents a linear process involving a sender and a receiver.



Source: Pavlik, J.V. & McIntosh, S. (2017). *Converging media: A new introduction to mass communication*, p.28.

New York: Oxford.

According to Fraser P. Seitel (2016), “Communication is a process of exchanging information, imparting ideas, and making oneself understood by others. It also includes understanding others in return” (p. 47). Communication is more than one party using words to

explain a point. Both parties must comprehend (i.e., decode and encode) the message, and the ideas must be shared in a way that allows for feedback. When broken down into its fundamental elements, communication consists of the sender, the receiver, the message, the channel, and the feedback. The sender is the originator of the idea or information. The receiver processes the sender's information. The message is the information provided by the sender (Nordquist, 2018). The message can be given in a multitude of ways via words, pictures, gestures, or even sounds. This means how the message is sent, and how the sender presents it, is crucial to whether the receiver will understand the message. This leads into the channel. The channel is how the message is sent. When the message has been reached and is comprehended by the receiver, feedback occurs, or a message sent by the receiver to the sender as confirmation (Nordquist, 2018). The process is completed once feedback has been given and begins anew with the receiver becoming the sender and the original sender becoming the new receiver. Who becomes the sender varies per communication form. For example, in intrapersonal communication, communication occurs between a person and themselves, or from within a person (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). The sender and receiver are the same. A common version of this is talking to oneself.

Human communication and interaction are complex and multifaceted. Generally, they can be divided into the following categories: verbal, nonverbal, written, and visual. Furthermore, there are at least ten types of academic disciplines involving human interaction: intrapersonal, interpersonal, intercultural, group, organizational/corporate, international, political, persuasive, speech communication, and mass communication.

- Intrapersonal communication: When the entire communication process takes place within an individual such as talking with oneself and debating with oneself.

- Interpersonal communication: Happens between two or more individuals. An email would be interpersonal communication (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).
- Intercultural communication: Revolves around sharing messages between members of different cultural groups. This is one way to gain a “worldview” (Bennett, 2013).
- Group communication: Happens between three or more individuals face-to-face.
- Organizational or corporate communication: Takes place within a given organization such as communication between the various departments and employees.
- International communication: Transpires when citizens, governmental and non-governmental entities interact with other nations in person or via media.
- Political communication: When information is generated by a political entity to impact/influence the internal and external policies of a given government.
- Persuasive communication: Is intended to influence the behavior and habits of intended audiences or receivers, such as advertisements and commercials.
- Speech Communication: Occurs when a person or entity shares information verbally to a gathered audience. The information can be scripted or impromptu.
- Mass communication: Takes place when one uses a mass medium, such as radio, television, or newspaper, to speak to a mass audience.

People often view communication as a simple process of talking and listening, but the above classifications illustrate the complexity of human communication and its various components.

Biases and Stereotypes:

In all daily interactions, people's perceptions and knowledge of others play a significant role. In other words, positive or negative stereotypes may help, or hinder our communications and interactions in any given situation. The term stereotype was coined by Walter Lippmann in his classic 1922 book, *Public Opinion*. According to him, people act and react toward each other according to the images in their heads.

Consequently, messages become lost in translation when the sender and receiver forget to consider their biases or stereotypical images. Most of the words that we use are abstract; hence, they can be interpreted differently by receivers/audiences. For example, there is no universally agreed-upon meaning for "justice" or "beauty". As the meaning of words change, and different demographics interpret them differently, messages can be often misconstrued. Common factors of receiver's bias are based on symbols, peer or group pressure, semantics, and media (Seitel, 52-55). There are many components to account for when communication occurs between humans, machines, and social media.

A basic understanding of the complexity of human communication illustrates that machine-to-machine, human-to-machine, and machine-to-human interaction is indeed more complex, and may result in a myriad of errors, misunderstandings, or malfunctions.

Ethical Behaviors in Social Media:

When communicating through social media or mass media, messages must be tailored to fit the demographics of the intended audiences. As such, a receiver's bias and stereotypes should be factored in before sending a message because, as mentioned earlier, messages can be

interpreted in several different ways. What one person finds hilarious, another may find harmful, offensive, or destructive.

To better demonstrate proper and improper ways to behave on social media, below are two abbreviated case studies, based on Seitel's book, *The Practice of Public Relations* (2016).

Case One (Seitel, p. 200):

In 2013, the former senior director of corporate communications, Justine Sacco, at IAC became the object of social media when, before boarding a plane, she tweeted, "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!". Unbeknownst to her, this tweet would determine her fate. The tweet received major backlash and when Sacco finally landed twelve hours later, her employer tweeted, "The offensive comment does not reflect the views and values of IAC. We take this issue very seriously, and we have parted ways with the employee in question". This is an example of poor communication and inappropriate humor that resulted in a negative outcome.

Case Two (Seitel, p.221):

This case revolves around the social media account of Taylor Swift. In 2015, she had a disagreement with Apple due to them refusing to pay royalties to artists during a free trial of its new service. Swift posted in response: "To Apple, Love Taylor. 'We don't ask you for free iPhones. Please don't ask us to provide you with our music for no compensation.' She closed by expressing hope that the company might change its policy and 'change the minds of those in the music industry who will be deeply and gravely affected by this.'" Her post prompted the Senior V.P. of Apple to change the company policy.

Questions:

Compare the two case studies:

1. What do they have in common?
2. Why did Taylor Swift make a difference, but Justine Sacco was fired?
3. How did their communication styles vary?

Morals, Ethics, and Law:

Morals, ethics, and laws make up the standards created to regulate the human conduct essential to a functioning society. Without them, society would run on physiological drives or “brute force” alone (Center et al, 2014). While the definitions overlap in some areas or sometimes are used interchangeably, they are different although interconnected. For example, a law based on moral values such as stealing is immoral and illegal. According to Center, et al. (2014),

Morality: Focuses on spiritual or religious teachings. For someone to be immoral, he/she breaks a rule based on the guidelines set within that person’s religion.

Ethics: Is a set of personal, professional, or organizational standards, governed by a sense of right, wrong, and fairness.

Law: Is a set of rules that determine what is allowed or forbidden, in a given country, based on legal legislation (239).

Every respectable business has a code of ethics such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA) for those within the medical field. For judges, it is unethical to preside over a case relating to a family member, or someone close to you. However, morals,

ethics, and laws vary from culture to culture as marriage at fifteen is a crime in America, but in other parts of the world, marriage at a younger age is acceptable. When determining morals, ethics, and laws, one should familiarize themselves with the culture that one currently resides in.

To illustrate immoral, unethical, and illegal behavior within the business world, an abbreviated case study, based on Center et al.'s book, *Public Relations Practices: Managerial Case Studies and Problems* (2014) is used as an example.

Case Study (Center et al, p. 243-246):

Forest Laboratories is the primary focus of this section. It is illegal for pharmaceutical companies to promote drugs “off-label,” or “when physicians use a drug for something other than what the FDA has approved it for.” The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) oversees testing products to ensure the safety of the public. Pharmaceutical companies are not allowed to market drugs off-label, but physicians can prescribe drugs to be used outside of their intended purposes. For this reason, it is also illegal for pharmaceutical companies to pay off or bribe physicians to prescribe drugs off-label. Forest Laboratories, Inc was accused of promoting its drug Celexa off-label as well as offering gifts to physicians such as fancy dinners, pricey event tickets, and more.

- In 1998, Celexa was FDA approved as an antidepressant for adults, but reports showed Forest Laboratories promoting Celexa to children and teenagers.
- In 1999, Celexa made \$90 million in sales and over \$1.4 billion in 2003.
- In 2006, The FDA began investigating claims. Soon after, The United States Attorney for the District of Massachusetts and the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) launched civil and criminal charges against Forest Laboratories. It was revealed that Celexa was being marketed

as an antidepressant for children although the drug was never tested on young adults and children. It was also proven that Forest Laboratories was bribing physicians to recommend the drug to children and teens.

- Forest Laboratories plead guilty in 2010 and faced several consequences.

They were obligated to inform all healthcare providers about their guilty plea and pay a \$313 million settlement. They also entered “a corporate integrity agreement with the Department of Health and Human Services” to receive annual reviews of ethics and market policies for five years.

Questions:

1. Where within this case do ethical dilemmas arise?
2. What complications could have arisen due to the actions of Forest Laboratories, Inc. and the doctors who prescribed Celexa to children?
3. If Forest Laboratories had remained ethical and not broken the law, could they have made as much money?
4. Did they lose more in the long run?

Ethics and Autonomy:

To introduce ethics in terms of human interaction with machines, the Will Smith movie, *I, Robot*, can be used as an example. The movie takes place in the year 2035 where robots are everywhere and have advanced Artificial Intelligence (A.I.). They are housemates, rescuers, friends, drivers, and all-around support mates. The story follows a detective with a dislike for robots as he investigates an alleged suicide. Along the way, the detective meets a sentient robot named Sonny who is so human-like, he experiences dreams and emotions. Although *I, Robot* is fiction, the movie is guided by very real ideas such as Isaac Asimov’s three laws of robotics.

A study from Vincent Müller (2020), outlines the laws as a potential ethical code of conduct for robots. The laws are as follows:

One, "a robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm;"

Two, "a robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law;" and

Three, "a robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws" (2020).

Without spoiling the movie, most of the problems within *I, Robot* occur when these ethical guidelines for robots are not followed, or when they do not align with human ethical codes. Throughout the movie, the interplay between humans and robots aligns with these rules. As in *I, Robot*, some today trust the A.I. within machines and some do not. There is a mix of support and fear for such technological advancements which is causing a question of what is considered ethical interplay between autonomous machines and humans. Müller's study illuminated causes of concern including potential relationships between humans and androids as well as job shortages. Some argue relationships will stop with friendship while others are concerned relationships may escalate. It has also been found that "productivity gains through automation typically mean that fewer humans are required for the same output" (2020).

The case study example below is abbreviated from Dziergwa et al.'s *Long-Term Cohabitation with a Social Robot: A Case Study of the Influence of Human Attachment Patterns* (2018). It examines human attachment to an EMYS robot, "a friendly robot head designed to teach kids foreign languages in a fun, interactive way. It can move, speak, and uses its expressive

face to display different emotions and connect with users” (Spectrum, 2018). The EMYS was adjusted for the study to serve as an autonomous personal assistant.

Case Study (Dziergwa et al, pp.163-176):

The EMYS was placed in the homes of three people with different levels of attachment for ten days. The first style was “secure” where direct, empathetic individuals’ relations are built through trust and security. Each style varies. The next style is “Anxious-ambivalent” where individuals who tend to rely deeply on relationships and attention attempt to maximize their time with those that they care for. The final style steers clear of people and is okay being alone. This is the “avoiding” style. The robot was designed to move around, show emotion, display intelligence, and speak.

Participants were told the goal of the study was to teach the EMYS to recognize color. After being shown a color enough times, the robot learned the color. Participants could discover the robot’s knowledge by playing a game with it. “EMYS could connect to the Internet, browse various news services, check weather forecasts, TV program, playback radio streams, serve as an alarm clock, send and receive emails with audio and photo attachments, remind the user of what was planned for the coming days, connect to the Facebook account of the study participant, and enabled access to most of the service’s content and functionality.”

The emotions of the robot were measured in comparison to each user’s likes or dislikes of the robot. The robot was shown to have a stable and similar emotional state to all the participants within the study. The human participants all agreed the robot was useful, and that his appearance made him approachable and friendly. All participants became attached to the robot regardless of

their attachment style. However, their satisfaction levels of the robot's emotions varied and supported the assumption that each robot should be personalized to match the human.

Questions:

1. How could the varying emotions of the EMYS conflict with Asimov's laws of robotics?
2. Would the EMYS be capable of evolving past its programming if it is capable of learning?

Business Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility:

According to Seitel (2016), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is defined as "how companies manage the business processes to produce an overall impact on positive society" (p. 115). CSR communication plays a role in how a society or community views a company, its activities, contributions, and values. Proper CSR is of strategic value because it builds trust and employee commitment in addition to setting the standard of what is considered normal for expectations and business practices (Kim, 2019; Kim et al, 2010). When morals, ethics, and laws are taken into consideration, the restraints on corporations become clearer.

Should a business not adhere to expected standards, it will be held accountable by not only its employees but by politicians and the community at large. Such aberration leads to a lack of trust and demoralization (Schultz et al, 2010). For reasons like these, it is pivotal to understand CSR and how it works. CSR occurs when an organization recognizes how its actions or inactions reflect upon the company and society. Upon reflection, the organization should take ethical and moral responsibility for the consequences of its conducts.

Questions to consider when addressing CSR and business ethics are: (1) could someone be hurt? (2) could someone receive advantages unfairly? (3) are these actions wrong? (4) how

will the media react? and (5) would we be willing to perform these practices ourselves (Center et al, 2014)? Such questions related to corporate responsibility impact all aspects of a given business.

The best way to show ethics and CSR in business is through an example. The following is an abbreviated case study based on Center et al.'s book, *Public Relations Practices: Managerial Case Studies and Problems* (2014).

Case Study (Center et al, p.253-257):

This study examines CSR within Nike between 1992-2005. The main topic evaluates “greenwashing” which is defined as, “disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image.” Nike was caught in this scandal for about a decade.

- In 1992, Nike created a code of conduct for itself after Jeff Ballinger exposed the indecent labor practices of Indonesian Nike factories. Amidst the negative press, Nike promised to fix the conditions and stated their commitment to workers. Thus, their negative coverage diminished.
- In 1997, a whistleblower exposed poor working conditions in a Vietnam factory. These conditions forced employees to work sixty-five hours per week without making the living wage. The conditions also caused respiratory issues amongst 75 percent of employees.
- In 1998, Nike was sued for its false advertising of commitment to workers. The California Supreme Court sided against Nike.
 - Nike implemented initiatives to better factory labor conditions, but the initiatives neglected “forced overtime and increasing earnings to a living wage.”

- In 2001, the company released a review of its CSR trials and achievements which faced heavy backlash because Nike did not adhere to many of the initiatives that it had set nor acknowledged wage and factory conditions. Upon receiving the backlash, Nike suspended its release of CSR.
- In 2003, Nike donated over \$1 million to the Fair Labor Association to end the legal war.
- Nike did not rerelease its CSR report until 2005.

Questions:

1. How do ethics play a role in Nike's CSR evaluation?
2. If Nike's code of conduct allowed for subpar working conditions, should they be considered socially irresponsible, or are they within their rights?
3. If Nike's factory conditions do not break laws, should the public be more forgiving in its stance against the company? Why or why not?
4. Why do you think Nike waited three and a half years before rereleasing its CSR report?

Conclusion:

Clearly, in this digital age, there are many forms of communication and any of them can open the door to potential ethical or legal quandaries. Whether face-to-face, through mediated digital technologies, or in professional contexts, students must be mindful of the several factors which can cause issues. As students majoring within the STEM fields are experimenting with a myriad of human and machine interactions, involving robots, AI, drones, autonomous vehicles, and computer-mediated communication, it is essential that they become aware of the fundamental challenges facing businesses in terms of communication, morals, ethics, laws, and corporate social responsibility.

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