Ethical Issues in Global Communication

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CHAPTER TEN
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INTRODUCTIOIN

The technological revolution has dramatically increased communication across the globe. Messages are being transmitted continually across electronic media to corners of the globe that were considered remote just ten years ago. In addition to telecommunication linkages enhanced by satellite transmissions, the Internet has become a fixture in the world's technological arsenal. With the explosion of electronic messages worldwide, ethical issues have surfaced concerning the use of global communication technologies. Although each communication technology may have a particular set of ethical concerns, this chapter addresses generic ethical issues that affect all communication technologies from telecommunication to the Internet.

As communication increases globally, it is clear that some of the world's citizens have more access to information and new technology than do others. In truth, information elitism is becoming increasingly apparent. New communication technologies diffuse quickly to North America and Europe while Latin America, Africa, and much of Asia receive technology more slowly. Consider telephones, for example. Boafo (1991) notes that black Africa possesses two telephones per 1,000 people while Tokyo has more telephones than all of sub-Saharan Africa. Brazil, Chile, and Mexico have approximately six and India and Indonesia .6 telephones per 100 people while the U.S., United Kingdom, and Germany have over 44 lines per 100 citizens. This huge disparity impacts on all aspects of communication life including phone access, availability of communication networks like the Internet, and connecting in general to the information superhighway.

Satellite communication offers another example of the disparity between technological haves and have-nots. First, Western powers have

clearly dominated satellite communication as evidenced by 72% of satellites in 1989 serving the industrialized countries and only 14 satellites available for the rest of the world (Hudson, 1990). Hudson (1990) concludes that satellites clearly benefited middle and upper income communities because they had the resources to lease transponders from Intelstat and, hence, participate in the satellite revolution.

Some have argued that "information domination" has actually increased with the deregulation and privatization of communication industries (Sussman & Lent, 1991). That is, global corporate entities have exploited the hue and cry for deregulation by taking over local communication industries in countries across the world. Sussman and Lent (1991) identify transnational mergers by selected corporations that produced further Western corporate domination of communication industries. These corporate communication giants include Alcatel (France), AT&T (U.S.), GTE (U.S.), Siemens (Germany), and NTT (Japan). Sussman and Lent's (1991) list predates the meteoric rise of Microsoft that has so dominated the global software industry that the U.S. government recently sued Microsoft for monopolistic practices.

More recent data on western corporate control of global communication show Reuters Television (U.K.) and CNN (U.S.A.) leading all other international news agencies; Bertelsam (German) and Walt Disney (U.S.A.) as the largest entertainment media corporations; and WPT (U.K.) and Saatchi and Saatchi (U.K.) first among advertising agencies (Lent, 1991). Japan is the only nonwestern country that has sizable technology companies with Toshiba second only to IBM in computer manufacturing. European and U.S. domination of international communication shifts control of technology, media, and their messages from individual countries to transnational corporate entities which determine access to and content of information. In support of this arrangement, it is argued that only by deregulating government-owned communication industries can market entities like transnational corporations prosper and provide high quality communication services to people worldwide. The ethical tradeoff is clear: relinquishing local autonomy for potentially improved communication services.

INFORMATION IMPERIALISM OR CULTURAL PLURALISM?

With the control of information production and transmission by European and U.S. corporations, cultures worldwide are exposed to communication over the Internet and airways that may not be compatible with local customs, politics, or ethical standards. Consider Brazil, for

example. Oliveira (1991) argues that advertising agencies flood Brazilian markets with commercial messages that promote consumption of products produced in North America. Interestingly, many of these commercials focus on consumer items that only a small percentage of Brazilians can afford given the huge disparities in wealth in Brazil. These commercial messages influence cultural tastes and buying patterns and create dependency on North American products (Oliveira, 1991). In 1990, the Brazilian Minister of Culture railed about dependency on North American culture when he said: "The phenomenon of cultural domination has reached unprecedented proportions. We have now entire societies that are basically consumers of culture, and others that are producers of culture" (Oliveira, 1991). Nowhere is this more evident than in television programming in Brazil where over 3/4 of all shows are imported from the U.S. This programming bombards Brazilian viewers with U.S. lifestyles and cultural values that some fear may have an eroding effect on Brazilian culture.

For many in the information business, the charge of cultural imperialism is perceived to be motivated by the desire to restrict people to a steady diet of certain types of information that normally serve the interests of a ruling elite or state controlled ideology. Ethically, people need information choices, so the cultural pluralists argue, and this can only be achieved by diversifying a country's information access and reception. A free and unfettered information superhighway is a liberating force, according to free market advocates, because it exposes the world's citizenry to a plethora of ideas, tastes, traditions, and morals. The tension between information imperialism and cultural pluralism is best exemplified in China.

The information revolution is quickly taking hold in China. Telecommunication has mushroomed with China installing more than 73 million phones since 1973, which is more phone installations than the entire developing world combined (Mueller & Tan, 1997). China has more than 28 million pagers, second only to the United States. And though cell phones are just beginning to emerge in China; it is one of the top five markets in cell phones with over 4.7 million subscribers (Mueller & Tan, 1997). China is knee-deep in new communication technology, and this poses new opportunities and threats to the Chinese government.

The Internet may be the most provocative and threatening new communication technology. While most Chinese are not computer literate, the volume of personal computers in China, which was approximately 3 million in 1996, is growing by 40% a year. Computer literacy is generally reserved for the most educated Chinese who are

often business leaders, professors, and graduate students at the leading universities. These information elites generally have more contact with international sources and, hence, rely heavily on the Internet. For the Chinese government, the Internet is a source of potentially threatening ideas which can not be allowed to grow without restrictions (Mueller & Tan, 1997).

The official governmental position is that the Internet, like other international media, poses risks to the economic, cultural, and political well being of the country (Tefft, 1995). To control the Internet, China has done several things including (1) maintaining a government monopoly (MPT) on international telecommunication connections, (2) requiring all international data to go through MPT, and (3) registering all end users. These measures place end users and information sources under the control of the government, which seriously curtails the freedom of the Internet (Mueller & Tan, 1997).

China also protects its communication market by not allowing direct foreign investment in telecommunication. By controlling telecommunication, China maintains a formidable surveillance apparatus. Also, centralization allows China to monopolize the lucrative and growing telecommunication industry. Given the sophistication, size, and resources of foreign corporations, China would not be able to compete successfully with them.

China's policy to control electronic communication is clearly at odds with the U.S. notion of a free and unfettered media. Like China, many countries with a developing communication infrastructure restrict access to their media markets and control media content. At the heart of this debate are conflicting ethical assumptions about freedom, self-expression, and responsibility. The next section of this chapter explores conflicting ethical assumptions that influence western and eastern communication markets.

ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF WESTERN COMMUNICATION ETHICS

Communication ethics grounded in a western model presumes that information, regardless of its controversy, should be available to listeners and media/new communication technologies should be able to pursue truth without significant control by external forces. The first amendment, from a U.S. perspective, provides a constitutional guarantee for a marketplace of ideas which also protects electronic media from undue government control. This approach to communication ethics flows from

a western perspective that human beings should choose their course of action and can be judged right or wrong on the basis of those choices.

Wargo (1990) indicates that the ascendance of the individual in western society springs from a Judeo Christian religious perspective that bifurcates the relationship between God, people, and nature. An implicit hierarchy is apparent in the Judeo Christian view that places God at the apex followed by human beings and lastly nature. It is the human soul—the spiritual side of being—that gives rise to ethical judgments.

Inherent in the Judeo Christian view of ethics, according to Wargo (1990), is free will—the presumption that an intellect, which only human beings possess, provides individuals with the ability to make choices. To sin, then, is to choose a course of action incompatible with divine law. The Judeo Christian emphasis on free will and choice are embedded in western communication ethics.

Nilsen (1966) writes that for communication to be ethical, choice must be based on the best information available. Access to information is key to developing ethical messages because it provides listeners with sufficient facts to make informed choices. It is not surprising that countries grounded in a Judeo Christian perspective often have developed codes of conduct for media professionals to protect information access and journalistic freedom (Cooper, Christians, Plude, & White, 1989). Also, the emphasis on reason and logic—so central to a Judeo Christian perspective—is also reflected in communication policies and practices in the U.S., which establishes reason and logic as touchstones for determining the ethical nature of messages.

For Western communication theorists, reason and logic are critical dimensions of ethical messages. Aristotelian philosophy emphasizes reason and logic, and reduces the value of emotional appeal (Shuter, in press-b). Since reason is central to free will, ethical discourse emphasizes logical arguments so that listeners can make reasoned choices when exposed to a message.

Finally, communication ethics in the U.S. and the West requires that all listeners have equal access to information, regardless of race, social class, religion, or national origin (Shuter, in press-a). Broadcast entities that discriminate on the basis of race, sex, or national origin can lose their media licenses and, hence, are required by law to make information as universally available as possible. Messages that demean or injure a person's race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or national origin are also considered unethical.

The ethical foundations of western communication ethics are not universally shared or approved by countries and regions worldwide. The interesting contrast to the west are Islamic states, which stretch from the

Middle East to Southeast Asia, and where Islamic tradition plays a critical role in defining ethical communication.

ISLAMIC FOUNDATIONS OF ETHICAL COMMUNICATION

Although the Judeo-Christian perspective is reflected in the ethical values of the west, there is still a legal separation between church and state, which may vary from country to country, but still establishes boundaries between secular and religious law. In contrast, the Islamic world, which constitutes about one quarter of the globe's population, infuses religion into the modern state. While the commingling of religious and secular tenets in the Islamic state has been modified in a post modern era after western contact, Islam still exercises significant influence over the sociocultural lives of Islamic inhabitants (Gibb, 1964; Hourani, 1971; Hovannisian, 1985).

Tawhid, one of the most important tenets of Islam, requires obedience to the laws of Allah (Hovannisian, 1985). Human beings, according to tawhid, are obligated to know and follow Islamic codes even if sovereign law conflicts with Allah's judgment. Tawhid proclaims the supremacy of Islamic codes over sovereign law, foreign ethical systems, or personal values, and obligates the faithful to obey (Mowlana, 1989).

Within an Islamic society, all communication is evaluated as ethical based on its compatibility with the Koran. First Amendment safeguards, universal access to information, and listener choice—hallmarks of western ethical communication—are incompatible with tawhid that looks only to the Koran for ethical guidance. Similarly, a free and unfettered system of mass communication is also in conflict with Islamic tradition. All electronic communication, then, is to be judged ethical by Islamic precepts that are articulated in the Koran.

The preeminence of intellect and reason, so critical to western thought, are also incompatible with Islamic ethics (Gibb, 1964; Rahman, 1984). In fact, Hovannisian (1985) writes that intellectualism practiced apart from the Koran is "a sin against human nature—maybe even a crime" (p. 8). Clearly, western broadcasters and journalists reporting in an Islamic state are challenged by this religious imperative and may find it significantly at odds with their training and ethical tradition. Salaman Rushdie, author of *The Satanic Verses*, experienced first hand the penalty for violating tawhid, having lived in seclusion for several years until his death penalty was recently lifted by the current Iranian government but opposed by many Iranian clerics who argue that only Ayatollah Khomeini, who died in 1989, can remove Rushdie's death penalty.

A GLOBAL COMMUNICATION ETHIC?

Contrasting and seemingly incompatible ethical systems challenge the development of a global communication ethic—a standard(s) by which to judge the ethical appropriateness of messages, their availability, and the media that transmit them. Islamic and western communication ethics are more than just different: they are on a collision course. Yet, some have argued that universal values do exist in societies, and these universals may serve as a springboard for a global communication ethic. Cooper, Christians, Plude, and White (1989) suggest that some common values exist in societies which include the need to express oneself, the expectation of honesty from others, and the requirement of social responsibility from those one interacts with. In a more recent book, Christians and Traber (1997) reduce universal values to the following triad: truth telling, respect for another person's dignity, and no harm to the innocent.

Christians and Traber (1997) argue that universal values spring from the "primal sacredness of life that binds humans into a common oneness" (p. 12). Reverence for life is the foundation of human dignity and is a fundamental right of being human, according to Christians and Traber. Human dignity should be provided to all people, regardless of race, gender, age, or ethnicity, and the denial of dignity is morally repugnant.

Truth-telling is another universal value that is rooted in the sacredness of human life, according to Christians and Traber (1997). They argue that falsehood and deception are morally unacceptable because they undermine the social order of any society. If humans cannot trust others to be truthful, the social fabric of a society would crumble. In short, human beings depend on stable social systems for survival, and truth-telling is a fundamental requirement of any enduring and healthy society.

Finally, Christians and Traber identify nonviolence as a universal value that springs from the reverence of human life. They argue that Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi made nonviolence more than a political strategy—it became a public philosophy etched in the moral consciousness of the human family. Nonviolence is the well from which no harm to the innocent is derived—a universal value that transcends culture and nation, according to Christians and Traber (1997).

Regardless of the values proposed for a universal communication ethic, this approach collapses when it is applied to specific cultural contexts and conflicts. Suddenly, "commonly shared" values like social responsibility and truthfulness are examined in light of multiple countries' customs and traditions, and the cultural sparks fly! Cultures

can and do interpret the same values quite differently, and often do not agree on how a value ought to be expressed in a society

Truth-telling and no harm to the innocent are ideals that ring so true in theory but collide in practice with indigenous cultural beliefs. In Salaman Rushdie's case, we have an Indian-born author who writes a novel that, in his estimation, tells the truth about Islam, and he is not only sentenced to death by the Ayatollah Khomeini, but is refused entry to his homeland, India, by the Indian government. His novel, *Satanic Verses*, is considered blasphemy by many Islamic clerics, truth-telling by Rushdie, and free expression by his western supporters. Rushdie claims he is innocent of all charges: western supporters agree with him and are appalled by Khomeini's death sentence; and many Islamic clerics still consider him guilty.

Social responsibility, an important value in Islamic and western societies, has different meanings in Saudi Arabia and the U.S. From a Saudi perspective, social responsibility is synonymous with compliance to the Koran. For the U.S., this interpretation violates the very essence of social responsibility that requires volition not obedience, choice not compliance.

CONCLUSION: AN ALTERNATIVE ETHICS FOR GLOBAL COMMUNICATION

An intracultural approach is an alternative to a universal communication ethic (Shuter, 1990, 1998, in press-a and-b). An intracultural perspective acknowledges the varied and potentially conflicting ethical traditions of societies. This approach searches for the "ethical and moral constraints of a society, the deeply held cultural beliefs in communication expectations that regulate human affairs" (Shuter, in press-a, p. 8). This approach also reveals a tight relationship between a society's values, its ethical traditions, and the communication practices, policies, and laws it has developed.

An intracultural ethical perspective has the following characteristics:

(1) It is based on the assumption that ethical communication standards are wedded to culture.

(2) It relies on grounded analysis to do ethical critiques rather than universal ethical frameworks.

(3) It challenges communication ethicists to immerse themselves intellectually and emotionally in the culture of the community being studied.

(4) It requires communication ethicists to explore and explain possible effects of their personal backgrounds on their ethical analysis.

Because ethics and culture are inseparable, universal values, and the frameworks that spring from a universal approach, inevitably lead to culturally biased ethical analysis. By shifting to a grounded analytical approach, communication ethicists can carefully consider a community's indigenous beliefs, religions, and sociocultural assumptions that drive ethical perspectives about communication. Since communication ethicists are products of their own cultures, it is vital that they take stock of their sociocultural underpinnings and consider how their backgrounds affect their analysis of ethical communication. With a deep understanding of self and others, ethicists may be able to render ethical critiques of communication that reflect the complexity of culture and the subtlety and nuance of cultural value.

An intracultural perspective will also help ethicists compare the nuances of ethical traditions held by several cultures, identifying subtle differences that drive ethical clashes in communication practices and policies. Cultural comparisons made after gathering strong intracultural data can produce unique insights into communication impasses that may have once seemed insurmountable. Sensitive and yet probing intracultural analysis is a pathway to greater intercultural understanding of complex communication challenges in the 21st century and the 3rd millennium.

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