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JLS 842



Introduction to web Publishing Module 4

JLS 842 (Introduction to Web Publishing)

Module 4

Course Developer/Writer

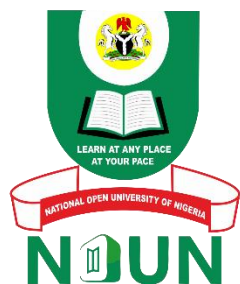
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Unit I Understanding the Concept of Ethics

1.0 Introduction

This unit is about the ethical issues to keep in mind when publishing for Web sites. The key is to remember that there are ethics that apply in publishing on the Internet.

2.0 Objectives

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- define ethics
- explain the purpose of ethics
- trace the origin of ethics.

3.0 Main Content

3.1 Definition of Ethics

Ethics can be described as the systematic study of the principles and methods for distinguishing right from wrong and good from bad. Ethics is a moral concept. The word ethics is of the Greek origin "ethos" which means character while the word "morals" comes from the Latin word "moralis" which means custom or manner (Asemah, 2011). Tschudin cited in Okunna (1995:1) says that ethics and morals mean custom, that is, a very fundamental way of doing things or of conduct which are not only customary, but also right.

Frankena and Granrose cited in Okunna (1995:1) say that the word ethics stands for a branch of morality and its problems. Ethics as moral philosophy is therefore, that branch of knowledge which is concerned with the standards of good and bad conduct in a society using societal norms as a basis for the evaluation of human conduct or behaviour.

Ethics therefore, is the moral philosophy or science which determines what is right or wrong in a social context. It is a moral rule or principle of behaviour for deciding what is right and wrong. Thus, Merrill cited in Nwodu (2006: 135), cited in Asemah (2011) defines ethics as a normative science of conduct which stipulates guidelines, rules, principles and codes that are designed to lead individual to make moral decisions. From the foregoing, it can be seen that ethics is a matter of morality.

Thus, in the context of ethics, the acceptance of or otherwise of human attitudes and behaviours, actions and inactions and overall conduct can be based on relative moral uprightness or otherwise, of such conduct. Thus, when we speak of people as moral or ethical, we usually mean that they are good people and when we speak of them as immoral or unethical, we mean that they are bad people. This agrees with Nwodu (2006: 135) who says that a given action can be said to be ethically right or wrong, good or bad, responsible or irresponsible, logical or illogical, socially acceptable or unacceptable and moral or immoral.

A study of ethics is a study of all those rules and guidelines which are designed to regulate the actions of human beings as they make moral decisions. Ethics are the codes or rules of

conduct that point us towards the right or best way to act in a situation; they are the codes for men in the discharge of their duties.

3.2 Purpose of Web Publishing Ethics

The purpose of Web publishing ethics is to assist the online publishers to be moral professionals. The importance lies in the fact that the Web publisher who has concern for ethics obviously cares about good or right actions and such a concern leads him to seek the "Summum Bonum" or highest good in publishing thereby, increasing his credibility both as a person and as a Web publisher. Ethics should therefore, saturate the whole process of mass communication, rather than be regarded merely as a minor aspect of communication.

The purpose of Web publishing ethics is to stipulate rules, guidelines, norms and principles that would guide the online journalists in making moral decisions. Attempting to gain public acceptance or prevent public outcry is not the only reason for advocating ethical professional practice and it is not a very profound one at that.

The most compelling reason for making ethical choices, other than internal personal satisfaction is what ethical behaviour can contribute to the profession. Ethical Web publishing is better publishing. Each day at work, online journalists make ethical decisions or choices and some days. Ethics takes us out of "this is the way I do it" or "this is the way it is always being done" into the realm of "this is what I should do" or this is the action that can be rationally justified. Merrill and Lowenstein cited in Okunna (1995:27) sums the purpose of journalistic ethics thus:

At least, a concern for ethics instills in the journalist a continuing sensitivity to his every action, to his every decision; it integrates or blends with his total search for truth and it gives him general awareness of himself, of others, of the consequences of interpersonal relations. A concern for ethics is the key plank in any journalistic platform; it is the alpha and omega of public communication.

3.3 Origin of Publishing Ethics

Generally, the concept of ethics has a very long history, dating back perhaps to the beginning of human existence. Philosophers believed that the concept of morality must have existed in a more or less unreflective form, probably closely associated with myth, religion and taboo from the time human beings began to live in groups. The concept of ethics must have being in existence in more primitive forms long before it came to be documented in written words.

There is however, a measure of uncertainty about the precise origin of this first book. Journalistic ethics is however a modern philosophy. The earliest signs of mass communication ethics appeared at the turn of the twentieth century as a reaction against the excesses of the extreme freedom of the libertarian theory of the press. The libertarian theory called for complete press freedom on the part of the Journalist. The theory advocated that there should be no pre-censorship and post-censorship of the press as human beings are rational beings.

The press men grossly abused this press freedom as they began to embark on negative journalistic practices like, yellow journalism, junk journalism, sensationalism, invasion of privacy, character assassination etc. Yaroson and Asemah (2008:64), cited in Asemah (2011) put it that, "as early as the late nineteenth century, critics began to identify flaws in the

libertarian theory. The press was evolving in a manner that fell short of the idealistic libertarian goals. And by the twentieth century, the voices for change were loud”.

The negative practices by journalists encouraged by complete press freedom brought about the social responsibility theory which calls for responsibility on the part of the journalist in the course of his duty. The social responsibility theory states that "freedom carries concomitant responsibility".

Thus, by the twentieth century, the time was ripe for the emergence of a theory of a free but, responsible press. This brought into existence the social responsibility theory of the press characterized by the rise of professional journalistic associations with codes of ethics designed to encourage responsible behaviour by their members. The social responsibility theory reconciles the freedom enjoyed by the journalist with his obligations to the society. It places emphasis on persons and media institutions that operate the media. McQuail (1987), cited in Asemah (2011) identifies some of the principles as:

- Certain obligations to society should be accepted and fulfilled by the press.
- These obligations are mainly to be fulfilled through setting high professional standards of truth, accuracy, objectivity, balance and informativeness.
- In the discharge of their duties, the media should be self-regulatory within the framework of law and established institutions.
- The society and public have a right to expect high standards of performance from the media and intervention can be justified to secure public good since journalist should be accountable to the society.

To maintain high standards, the theory holds that the press must be controlled either by itself or by the government.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Should there be codes of ethics to regulate Web publishing?

4.0 Conclusion

We have discussed the meaning, definitions, background and purpose of Web publishing ethics. Ethics is as old as man; it acts a guide to Web publishers; thus, Web publishers ought to be familiar with the ethics of Web publishing.

5.0 Summary

In this unit, we appraised the historical genesis of ethics, from its modern inception in the United States of America to its emergence in Nigeria. As well, we examined the purpose of Web publishing ethics, in addition to detailed look at some conceptual definitions. This is imperative as you must be able to discuss the concept “ethics” and understand its purpose.

6.0 Self-Assessment Exercise

1. Discuss the concept “ethics”.
2. Trace the origin of ethics.

3. Discuss the purpose of ethics.

7.0 References/Further Reading

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Unit 2 Ethical Principles

1.0 Introduction

Ethical principles are the guidelines that help us as individuals to make ethical decisions. Since the days of ancient Greece, philosophers have tried to draft a series of rules or guidelines governing how to make ethical choices.

2.0 Objectives

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- identify and discuss the ethical principles
- state the ethical theories of Web publishing
- identify the ethical values in Web publishing.

3.0 Main Content

3.1 Ethical Principles

Below are some ethical principles as identified by Asemah (2011):

Aristotle's Golden Mean Principle: This principle says that moral values lie between extremes. It stresses moderation as opposed to extremes or excesses. Aristotle believed that an individual could obtain strong moral character, but he or she would necessarily face difficult choices. By adopting a middle position, one could avoid both excesses and deficiencies.

Going by the Golden mean, an individual has to exercise practical reason in the conduct of any particular activity through the setting of high standards. Aristotle's ethical system resulted in what is now called virtue ethics. Virtue ethics flows both from the nature of the act itself and the moral character of the person who acts. In the Aristotelian sense, the way to behave ethically is that:

- You should know through the essence of practical reasoning what you are doing.
- You must select the act for its own sake in order to flourish.
- The act itself must come from a firm and unchanging character.

Courage for example is a mean between foolhardiness on one hand and cowardice on the other hand. But to determine that means, you have to exercise practical wisdom, act according to high standards and act in accordance with firm and continuing character traits. Principles of the Golden Mean are evident today, especially in online journalistic practices. For example, balance and fairness in reporting is built on golden mean.

Judeo-Christian Ethics Principle: The Judeo-Christian ethics appears in phrases from scripture such as “do unto others as you want them do unto you and love thy neighbour as thyself”. This principle simply emphasizes respect and dignity for all people based on a universal love for God in making ethical decisions.

Based on this norm, one would consider how his decision will affect other people. The emphasis of this principle is that the journalist in the course of carrying out his assignment or duties should not treat people the way he will not like to be treated. Do not treat people as a means to an end. The basic rule of human beings to self-determination should not be violated by using them as simply a means to accomplish a goal. The rights, values and decisions of others must always be respected.

Kant's Categorical Imperative: The German philosopher, Emmanuel Kant is identified with this ethical principle guideline. The baseline is that, an individual should act on the premise that the choices he makes could become universal law in making moral decisions; we must seek what would be acceptable to all human beings in the society.

In other words, those principles we can apply comfortably to all situations will lead us to the right decision. To measure the correctness of our behaviours, Kant suggested that we act according to rules that we would want to see universally applied. In Kant's formulation, categorical means unconditional, no exceptions. Right is right and it should be done, no matter what the consequences. The individual's conscience plays a large part in Kant's thinking.

A categorical imperative is discovered by an examination of your conscience; the conscience informs us what is right. If after performing an act, we feel uneasy, guilty, we have probably violated our conscience. Applied to mass communication, a categorical imperative might be that all forms of deception are wrong and must be avoided. No one wants deception to become a universal practice.

Utilitarianism: The writings of John Mill Stuart established the philosophy of the utilitarianism in the nineteenth century. Mill claimed that when faced with moral decisions, we must consider which action will result in the most happiness for the greater number of the people. This is often referred to as the greatest good in decision making. Utility is described as the greatest benefit for the greatest number of people.

Thus, the basic tenet of the principle is that, we are to determine what is right or wrong by taking into consideration what will yield the best ratio of good or bad for the general society. Utilitarians ask how much good is promoted and how much bad is restrained by different courses of behaviours. Clear methods to evaluate ethical choices are:

- Calculate all the consequences, both good and bad that would result from each of your options.
- Choose alternatives that maximize value or minimize loss.

Under the utilitarian view, it may be considered ethical to harm one person for the benefit of a large number of people. For example, a driver who has eighteen passengers in his vehicle may consider it ethical to knock down somebody who tries to cross the road while the driver is on a high speed. The essence is for him to save the eighteen passengers and harm just one person.

Egalitarianism: Based on the work of John Rawls, egalitarianism argues that everyone must be treated equally and fairly when we form ethical judgements. Rawls introduced the veil of ignorance as an element in ethical decision making. This means that, choosing a right course of action requires blindness to social position or other discriminating factors like religion, ethnicity, tribe, age, sex etc. By wearing a veil when considering a decision, an

individual can eliminate possible biases or discriminations and therefore, treats all persons in an equal manner. Without the veil of ignorance, minority viewpoints and those representing weaker points of view may be ignored or overlooked. The veil allows decisions to be made without partial thinking or cultural biases. Justice is blind, and it only emerges when everybody is treated without social differentiation.

3.2 Theories of Ethics

A theory is a far reaching conceptualization of a phenomenon based on systematic observations. Ethical theories offer precise and detailed ethical conduct or behaviour of human beings. Fab Ukozor (2000:7) describes ethical theory as being explanatory in nature in the sense that they give reasons why human beings take whatever moral decisions they take or arrive at in their relationships with others.

Ethical theories propose the appropriate reasons in which our moral decisions should be based and have been developed to identify how we should determine what is actually good not only for ourselves, but, for others. They are theories about justifying our moral actions. To justify here is simply to propose reasons for or to explain.

Generally, ethical theories can be described as generalizations put forward to explain, describe, prescribe or predict human ethical behaviours. They are explanatory because, they give reasons why human beings take whatever moral actions and decisions they arrive at in their dealings with fellow human beings. Theories of ethics are descriptive in the sense that they stipulate how people should behave in situations that involve ethical considerations. In addition, these theories are predictive in that, they indicate how people are likely to behave under certain situations. Below are some of the theories of ethics, as identified by Asemah (2011):

Deontological Theory: This theory simply assumes that for an action to be judged right or wrong, it should not be hinged on the consequence, rather, it should be based on the intention behind the action. Deontology or non-consequentialism defines right action-considering the intrinsic qualities of an action.

Deon means, what ought to be done. For the deontologists, certain things like virtues are intrinsically good and ought to be sought after. The rightness or wrongness of actions should depend on the intrinsic quality and not the consequence. Thus, once an online journalist believes that the action he is taking is right, he should not consider what the outcome will turn out to be. He is to appraise the motive behind an action, rather than the consequence.

Teleological Theory: The word “teleological” comes from the Greek word "teleo" which means result or consequence. This theory is the opposite of deontological theory in that the emphasis is on the consequence of an action on the people. In taking ethical decisions, the individual has to weigh the consequence of such actions on the people.

Here, people judge a moral ethics not by rule but, by the aftermath effects. The prediction is that, it is the result or consequence of an action that determines the rightness or wrongness of such actions hence, teleological theory is also called consequence ethics or consequentialism. Therefore, in any situation, one should calculate the possible consequences of performing various actions relevant to that situation and choose the one that produces the greatest ratio of good or evil.

Consequence oriented theories emphasize that we should look at the possible consequences or practical implications of our intended actions in order to determine whether an action is right or wrong. If the bad consequence outweighs the good ones, then, the proposed action should be abandoned and it should be regarded as morally wrong. Should the good consequence outweigh the bad ones however, the proposed action should be considered as morally permissible.

Absolutist Theory: The ethical absolutist believes that there is one universal and eternal code that basically applies to everyone in all ages. The change in opinions, traditions and conditions makes no difference. This implies that whether a journalist finds himself in the north, south, east or west, it does not matter; the location or locality or geographical enclaves does not matter.

Regardless the socio-cultural, economic and political environment an online journalist finds himself, he has to take into consideration objectivity, truth, balance and fairness, credibility etc. This theory of ethics is based on the argument that a right action should be right in all places at all times and in all circumstances.

Relativist Theory: The relativists believe that ethics are not universal. The fundamental reasoning of relativism is that moral standards should vary according to cultures, circumstances, times etc. This goes to say that the geographical location an online journalist finds himself determines what is ethical. What is ethical in a given socio-cultural and political context may be unethical in another socio-cultural and political context.

Legalistic Theory: The legalistic theory is very rigid and uncompromising in its insistence on objective absolute moral principles in a society. These are the principles which traditions and social consensus have ratified over the years as serving the society or group best. The theory therefore states that absolute principles that worked for a society and which are objectively considered to have served the society best should be meticulously codified and religiously applied as moral principles that will guide the actions in that society.

Antinomian Theory: The theory is simply called "against the law theory". It totally rejects all other theories and ethical principles and it is a kind of non-ethics. Non-ethics in the sense that it does not subscribe to any of the assumptions. The Web publisher who subscribes to antinomian theory believes that man is a rational human being and being a rational human being, there is no need to set rules, standards, principles etc., for him to follow. This it is believed negates the rational property of man.

When there is no ethical standard to guide a Web publisher, he will be prone to unpredictable, erratic and irrational behaviour guided by his whims and caprices. Thus, it is called whims and caprices. This situation of non-ethics can lead to anarchy in the society because every Web publisher will begin to act on intuition, imagination and instinct.

Situational Theory: This theory tries to strike a balance between legalistic and antinomian theory. The situational theory of ethics considers the rightness or wrongness of an action in relation to the particular situation in which the doer of the action finds him or herself. Ethical decision making should depend on the context or situation; it should aim at contextual appropriateness. The snag with the theory like that of antinomian is that often times, practitioners are guided by mere feelings, instincts and intuitions that are not too good for taking decisions that would affect many lives.

3.3 Ethical Values

Below are some of the ethical issues a Web publisher should always consider:

1. **Honesty:** The Web publisher has to be honest to the core. People who are honest command more respect than those who are dishonest. When the members of the public discover that the online publishers are not honest, they no longer repose confidence in them.
2. **Integrity:** One who has integrity is one who has principles. A man with principle and integrity does not easily fall to cheap things – “brown envelop”. *When you have integrity, your yes becomes your yes while your no is your no.* Integrity means, being in a state of wholeness, uprightness, honesty or purity. Integrity makes a man. Integrity earns societal respect while the opposite, would attract disrespect and scorn from those with whom one interact.
3. **Pursuit of Excellence:** Ethical values also entails that one should strive to achieve excellence in all ramifications.
4. **Truth:** Truth is the absolute reality. The Web publisher needs a firm commitment to the truth. An allegiance to truth is at the base of ethical values. A virtuous Web publisher is the one who has respect for and tries to live by the virtues of truth, wisdom, courage, justice and temperance.

Self-Assessment Exercise

How do these ethical values help in adding to the reputation of the Web publishers?

4.0 Conclusion

We have discussed ethical principles and ethical theories in this unit. As well, we examined the ethical values. This is imperative as you must be able to understand the ethical basis for Web publishing.

5.0 Summary

In this unit, we have discussed ethical principles, theories of ethics and ethical values. Among the ethical principles are: Aristotle’s Golden Mean Principle, Judeo - Christian Ethics Principle and Kant’s-Categorical Imperative. There are several theories of ethics; they include: Deontological theory, Teleological theory, Absolutist theory, Relativist theory, Legalistic theory and antinomian theory. One of the ethical values identified in this unit is truth. Web publishers must be truthful in their publications.

6.0 Self-Assessment Exercise

1. Identify and discuss the various ethical principles you know.
2. Elaborately discuss the theories of ethics, using relevant examples.
3. What are the ethical values known to you?

7.0 References/Further Reading

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