

# RTV 4930

## Digital Media Ethics

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### Overview

Where do we live these days? We live online.

And what makes a happy life? Everyone getting on. But the debate arises when standards of behavior for “everyone” are discussed. It is the age old-question: how should I live?

This course examines digital life, and behavior, in the 20-teens. We review how the internet has changed human interaction, and what is good and bad about this. The course involves case studies, discussion, and deliberation, as well as reading and listening to fundamentals of ethical thought. Current affairs play a big part. Moral philosophy is a basis for the exploration of issues, but also important are developed and developing cultural norms. We’ll also consider how different standards can apply in different societies or communities.

### Explorations

Throughout this unit, students will:

- Explore traditional ethical standards, and the different problems today with vast audiences and lack of regulation on the internet
- Discuss and deliberate on appropriate action when an online ethical problem arises
- Identify ethical dilemmas in journalism, public relations, activism and other mass mobilization practices via the internet
- Explore the differences between visual, audio and written material when posting
- Make and justify decisions about ethical dilemmas
- Appreciate the challenges that Facebook, Instagram, twitter and even Linked-In pose to our ethical professional life. Appreciate the challenges that the online behavior of powerful people can create.

### Materials

See separate document in your Canvas folder for the reading list and recommended resources.

### Milestones

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**First assignment: February 9**

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**Second assignment: March 16**

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**Third/final assignment: April 18**

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## Requirements

By the end of the semester, students will be expected to have developed these skills, all with regard to the online environment.

- critical understanding of ethics and their application to journalism and other communications professions
- appreciation of differences between communication in the online and offline environments
- knowledge and analysis of regulation of journalism/PR/video industries
- awareness of current codes of behavior for media professionals, and how these fit in the online environment

## Evaluation

There will be three assignments, and compulsory participation in at least one online discussion. (See Milestones) Further information will be given regularly via announcements in the Canvas area.

## Programme of Study, Week by Week

1. Background and set-up: The **structure of cyberspace** – comparison with ‘non-virtual’ world in terms of personal interaction, collective intelligence, social mores. Historical difference from ‘offline’ scenarios and encounters. The rapid evolution of a digital world, and its implications for personal interactions and mass power. Who is in charge? (A question we will return to later in the course.)
2. **Ethics in our history** – that is, predominantly Anglo-Saxon/European moral philosophy and traditions of behavior. How appropriate is this in a globalized world? What, if any, are the alternatives? Four key thinkers: Aristotle, Kant, Hobbes, Rawls. Were they right or wrong? Are their ideas truly universal – that is, do they still apply now? and how should the digital world change under their view of life and good behavior?
3. **The President and Fake News: Lies and the Decline of the Legacy Media.** It was the ‘new word’ of 2017. The President coined it and refers to it constantly. By becoming a cliché, the term has lost its original meaning. But its power should not be under-estimated. We will also look at how Mr Trump’s use of twitter is problematic. This will form the topic for our first assignment.
4. **Privacy:** Arguably the biggest challenge of the online world. Two strands: authorities looking into our communications (think Edward Snowden, Russia); and the difficulty in having a private life if one wants to embrace the connectivity of the internet, in particular social media. Since Mark Zuckerberg declared that privacy is dead, a once-sacred part of life has become ‘old-fashioned’. How does, and should, the modern communications professional view individual privacy.

5. **Free speech:** everyone has a platform – everyone can broadcast. How should we be wary of this power, and while respecting the First Amendment, not do harm to innocent or vulnerable people by allowing extremist opinions to circulate? What about texting/SMS– can ‘the rules’ apply? Unconsidered commentary is a bad thing, but is it our right? Conflict between privacy and free speech – chapter 3, section one of Davisson and Booth (required text).
6. **Social Media:** Speed kills. And that is what undermines the fantastic connectivity of twitter, Facebook, Snapchat: we step back and take a look at the history, commercial success, and social role of these platforms. How is good behavior encouraged, or bad punished? Google set the tone by promising to “do no evil”. Zuckerberg’s empire, ads, Russians, etc. We will discuss if Facebook has reached critical mass, or if it is a fact of life like a church that will never go away. Required text: chapter 7, section two: *Between Ethics, Privacy, Fandom and Social Media*.
7. **Using Big Data:** Ethical use of data about individuals by companies, publishers, journalists, salespeople. Exploiting online activity for commercial or political gain. Chapter 1, section one in Davisson and Booth: *Little Brother: How Big Brother ...*
8. **Image Conscious:** the reality – or is it - that is now available to everyone. The speed and ease of video, and how anything and everything can be filmed and uploaded. The upsides and downsides of this, and how to design rules for ourselves. Verification and impact. The rise of Snapchat, Instagram, and what ethical challenges posed by the visual. Chapter 2, Section one in Davisson & Booth: *“The classroom is NOT a sacred space*.
9. **Let’s talk about trust:** It underpins everything on the web, but especially, if we’re talking about our professions, our credibility and hence our success. How can you ethically create trust online?
10. **Marketing to Children:** At the same time, the most innocent and the most savvy consumers of online platforms. We’ll isolate marketing online for consideration before thinking about the vulnerability of kids. Protecting children, and sensitivity surround images of death or injury.
11. **Artificial intelligence and ethics:** AI is coming everywhere, and if you believe the most doomsday predictions (Glass title book), most of our jobs will disappear into robot world. In this session we consider how digital ethics apply to robots used in healthcare and war. We also think about the “internet of things” and any relevance this might have in media ethics.
12. **The mundane and the unmentionable:** emails, porn and terrorism. How to handle brushes with porn and the dark web. New English legislation on ‘verifying’ the age of viewers of adult materials.

### 13. Revision and Group Chat