Media Ethics and Global Justice in the Digital Age

Today's digital revolution is a worldwide phenomenon, with profound and often differential implications for communities around the world and their relationships to one another. This book presents a new, explicitly international theory of media ethics, incorporating non-Western perspectives and drawing deeply on both moral philosophy and the philosophy of technology. Clifford Christians develops an ethics grounded in three principles – truth, human dignity, and nonviolence – and shows how these principles can be applied across a wide range of cases and domains. The book is a guide for media professionals, scholars, and educators who are concerned with the global ramifications of new technologies and with creating a more just world.

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Politics and relations among individuals in societies across the world are being transformed by new technologies for targeting individuals and sophisticated methods for shaping personalized messages. The new technologies challenge boundaries of many kinds – between news, information, entertainment, and advertising; between media, with the arrival of the World Wide Web; and even between nations. Communication, Society and Politics probes the political and social impacts of these new communication systems in national, comparative, and global perspective.

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This book is dedicated

to

Priscilla Jean Christians an *imago Dei*

and to

my family *summum bonum*

who teach me the morality of virtue with their exemplary lives and

duty ethics with their perspicacious minds.

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Foreword

The rapid development and spread of digital media technologies are often referred to in revolutionary terms. Indeed, the impact of these technologies on the media industry and journalistic practices has been rapid and varied. The migration of audiences to the online sphere caused the collapse of established business models in legacy media, while rejuvenating ways of reporting, storytelling, and connecting with publics. Digital media have been praised for democratizing the production of news by increasing citizen participation, at the same time as the appetite of tech giants to devour smaller and independent outlets has been bemoaned. The social and political impacts of these technologies have been equally far-reaching. While the digital media's global reach has created new networks for solidarity around causes from climate change to war resistance, it has also managed to reach into the most intimate spheres of individuals by mining their data and invading their privacy. Digital media have been credited with facilitating the fall of repressive regimes (refer to the exaggerated claims around the role of social media in the "Arab Spring") as well as providing platforms to those who spread terror (for instance, the online display of beheadings). The connections made on mobile phones, via email or the World Wide Web, have given us a sense of being drawn into an interconnected global community where we bear witness to and express our outrage at injustices. Yet, these connections can also remain limited to the solipsistic "filter bubbles" where people's worst biases are confirmed, and they are emboldened to spew racist diatribes, hate speech, and character assassinations online that threaten to tear up the social fabric.

It is clear, therefore, that although digital media represent major technological advances, they are not neutral or value free. Therefore, while digital media technologies are in many ways radically new, the ethical questions they raise have for centuries been at the core of our being human: What is truth and how do we know it? How do I live together with others? How do I respect the dignity of those who are different from me? How can I contribute to a world that is fair and just?

The ethics of being in a world shaped by digital media extends beyond technocratic regulatory aspects. It demands of us difficult choices in all areas of our lives: what images we choose to consume, what information we decide to share, what global struggles for justice we engage in. In the contemporary world, we do not merely appropriate media as tools; we are immersed in them as an environment. Because these media shape our way of being in the world and how we relate to others, the ethical choices they demand of us are of an ontological category – going to the core of our very being.

Clifford G. Christians has a keen eye for the complicated and contradictory ethical challenges we face in a world shaped by digital media. To deal with these difficult questions, he takes us back to the fundamental questions of ethics and justice in moral theory. His dazzling mastery of the wide literature in moral philosophy as well as in media, technology, and society makes him a trusted guide through the moral maze of life in a digital era. Not only does he masterfully draw on theoretical insights to meet problems of practice and policy, but he also advances the frontiers of media ethics significantly on a theoretical level, by engaging in conversations with traditions that developed outside Western orthodoxy, for instance, African philosophy, Latin American liberation theology, Confucianism, and Islamic traditions. But Christians's engagement with traditions outside the West should not be mistaken for the mere curiosity of a traveling collector. He is deeply invested in diversifying epistemology as a matter of justice. He is not only intent on redressing the historical imbalances and imperialisms in knowledge production. His urgency to de-Westernize media ethics is also born out of the realization that there will be no solving the intricate and serious issues facing humans in an interconnected and interrelational world if this is attempted in isolation. Christians is correct in understanding the task of global media ethics as going beyond merely the token inclusion of a broader diversity of perspectives, but also as working toward a more just and equitable global communications environment.

The need for a global perspective is all the more important given the amplification of communication beyond borders made possible by digital technologies. The limitations of thinking about the world in terms of the Westphalian nation-state have become clear from these flows and contra-flows of information. As we have seen in the way that many states in the Global North have grappled to find an appropriate policy response to the influx of refugees, the values of hospitality and cosmopolitanism are again high on the global agenda. As we know from ongoing political economy critiques of the internet, the digital media landscape in many ways mirrors wider global socioeconomic inequalities. The ethical implications of these asymmetries often remain implicit in these critiques. What this book does to draw on the principles of distributive justice, to reflect more clearly and explicitly on the moral dimensions of the digital divide, is therefore very important.

Thinking about media ethics in the global digital environment raises questions too profound to consider within the confines of the frameworks of professionalism and codification. These questions demand a reexamination of the very foundations upon which ethical theory should rest in a rapidly globalized yet stubbornly unequal world. This book rises to the challenge in a lucid and path-breaking way. In following the three principles of truth, human dignity, and nonviolence, Christians develops a theoretical foundation of universal protonorms that is at once a humanocentric rather than an instrumentalist or technologically deter-ministic approach and is sufficiently open ended to form the basis for moral engagement across borders. Technology may offer us new tools to work toward the good, but it cannot by itself generate a value system; we need to develop this out of core beliefs and commitments. Christians roots this value system in the primacy of life itself, in which communication is the connective tissue across cultures, and relationship is at the core of our being. Linked to the sacredness of life is a respect for human dignity and a commitment to peace as interlinked protonorms that underpin our thinking about being in the digital world.

The emphasis on relationship is not only vital for developing an ethics that responds to the interconnections made possible by digital media technologies but also for an ethics that strives to overcome the Western parochialism that has hitherto characterized much of the field. If we strive to reach the aim of understanding media ethics in global, non-imperialistic terms, "relationship" and "community" should be under-stood in their broadest possible sense. Relationship does not have much ethical depth if it only applies to those closest to us, those with whom we

agree, or those we identify with. Nor does community retain its revolutionary power if it merely entails tolerance of the other, instead of being rooted in the much more difficult and transformative imperative of love. Relationship and community in a global sense dare us to care for those distant others who are caught in the web of poverty and conflict, to intervene in the plight of those who cannot contribute anything to our own welfare, to engage with suffering instead of merely being spectators. This is what the sacredness of life looks like in a digital era: to use technology not as an end in itself, nor as a means to strengthen the economic position or political prowess of the media, but to transform digital media from a technocratic tool to a meeting place where we can look into the face of the Other as we struggle to learn what it means to live a life that is truthful, sacred, and dignified.

We can only meet this Other if we approach the engagement truthfully. Honesty, fairness, and truth are more than quaint slogans for media outlets. These values are prerequisites for our very being as creatures-in-relation. If the lie could travel halfway around the world while the truth was still putting its boots on in Mark Twain's day, then lies today can circumnavigate the globe several times due to the increased speed and reach of digital technologies. But if truth is a foundational value for human beings, as this book argues, it should be defined more broadly than mere facticity in the disinterested, "objective" mode. Truth is that which resonates with our deepest experiences, hopes, and fears. We know from the panic around "fake news" that digital media afford opportunities for lies and half-truths to spread quickly, but we recognize with consternation that their appeal is possible from the loss of trust in mainstream or legacy news media. An ethical media in the digital age is one that does not exploit hopes and fears with the cynical intent of stoking fires, but one that listens to audiences with the honest intent of interpreting their expressions – whether these be joy, fear, or outrage – and tries to imagine what it must be like to stand in their shoes. Such a moral imagination, channeled through honest storytelling, can create the deeper understanding of the world and of each other that humans inherently crave. If journalism will not attempt to reconnect with emotions, identities, and cultural locations in the deeply truthful way that Christians describes, demagogues and populists will usurp the connection, with disastrous effect.

The media we need, therefore, is one that distills truthful meaning out of the bewildering array of facts now available to us through the wide and seemingly omnipresent digital media. But we also require media to help us

transform truth into empathy. This is where we need the second proto-norm, human dignity, to be restored to the center of media ethics in a digital world. Where superficial debate, voyeurism, mining of data, and extreme speech threaten to overshadow the potential of these new platforms to make connections, foster community, and provide alternative perspectives, the monitorial, detached stance is not an adequate ethical response. While there have been many examples of how digital media can help monitor the excesses of corporate and political power and mobilize citizens to rise up, monitoring cannot be the only way to ensure the flourishing of human beings in all dimensions. An ethics of care and community on a global scale is required to foster a media that can contribute to the alleviation of poverty and redress of historical injustices and work toward a world where human rights and equality are paramount. This is a task of literally global proportions. The universal, however, is also reflected in the particular – in the everyday practices of representation and narrative. How journalists depict people, how they talk about them, who they talk about, and about whom they remain silent matter deeply. The struggle for truth, dignity, and nonviolence in a digital age is not one to be waged in isolation. In this, Christians leads the way in drawing from a variety of articulations of ethical theory around the world, while remaining conscious of the importance of anchoring such cultural diversity in shared ethical protonorms.

The ultimate challenge of this book, therefore, is one that oscillates between the local and the global, the specific and the universal. Final closure is not achieved; the dialectic ensures that ethical reflection remains dynamic and productive. On one side of the local-global coin is the need to be attuned to the specificity of lived experience, expressions of affect, and cultural identity. This is where the absolutist ethics of Enlightenment rationality is undone as we reach down to the grassroots and listen carefully to hear voices we may have missed before. These might be voices of rage, anguish, or anger, but they need to be listened to even if they sound different from the sounds of "rational deliberation" we are familiar with in the elite public sphere. These are the voices of the poor, of women and children, of victims of racism and homophobia, of the Southern subaltern. If we listen closely to these voices in localities, we will hear how the protonorms of truth, dignity, and nonviolence are given concrete meaning through the practical wisdom of everyday, lived culture. In this attempt to move away from the Western-centric history of media ethics it is important that this ethnographic thickening of protonorms should not be done in a patronizing fashion considered merely as local color to illustrate or

provide evidence for theories developed elsewhere. The knowledge generated in localities, especially those in the Global South that have for so long been relegated to the margins of media ethical theory building, needs to be treated seriously on the level of theory and not merely application. This is the ongoing and pressing project of "decolonizing" media ethics scholarship. Seeing the local and the global as two sides of the same coin, however, means that this local knowledge will then be used to inform our understanding of what is universal, what is shared, what has global relevance for being human in this digital age.

Clifford Christians's scholarship is deeply reflective, theoretically solid, international in its outlook, and inspiring in its commitment to the public good. Despite pointing to the many atrocities, conflicts, and moral failures around the globe that have militated against the sacredness-of-life proto-norms – truth telling, human dignity, nonviolence – the book's overarching tone is optimistic. It displays a belief in the innate goodness of human beings and considers technology to be determined by human actions – not the other way around. This emphasis on agency is hopeful and inspiring. This landmark book is a vital companion as we explore the ethics of living with and within digital media in a global world – to help us understand who we are in this new digital world, and who we may yet become.

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Media Studies, University of Capetown; Editor-in-Chief,
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