

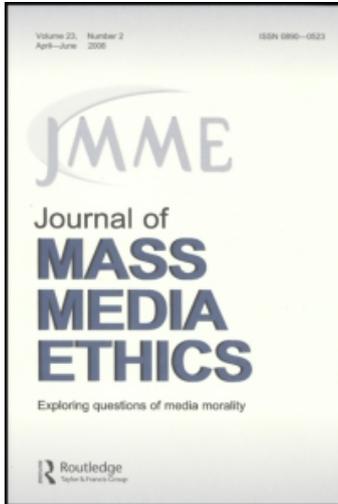
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### Moral Agency in Media: Toward a Model to Explore Key Components of Ethical Practice

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# Moral Agency in Media: Toward a Model to Explore Key Components of Ethical Practice

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Recent advances in moral psychology and applications of virtue science have created promising opportunities to refine theories of media practice and ethical principles. This article sets forth the theoretical foundation for a model of virtuous action among media exemplars that is multidimensional, inductive, and informed by these developments. The model draws on a range of psycho-social assessment tools to explore five key dimensions of virtuous behavior: story of the self, personality, integration of morality into the self, moral ecology, and moral skills and knowledge. The model's structure is designed to strengthen the empirical basis used to make normative and predictive claims about media practice.

I assume that it is impossible to understand the moral quality—positive or negative—of an action without resorting to the agent's judgment, that moral judgments reflect the individual's general understanding of himself or herself, other people, social relations, and situations, and that this understanding can and does change as a result of the development of one's intelligence and of richer and more complex experience with the social world. (Blasi, 1994, p. 169)

Psychologist Augusto Blasi issued this call for a more pluralistic approach to the study of moral cognition 15 years ago. Since then, advances in cognitive

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psychology and virtue theory, as well as work in the emerging field of neuroethics, have informed and challenged our understanding of moral agency. They also hold important, even radical, implications for the field of communication ethics theory and research on ethical practice in media. How might researchers more effectively explore the dynamics of ethical decision making in the context of media sociology? Recent moral psychology research has made it clear that factors contributing to moral agency are multidimensional. Our personality traits, value systems, work environment, and levels of moral development and skills all collude to shape our motives and abilities for moral action. These dimensions cannot be simply identified and described; we must become adept at interpreting their interrelationships, discerning how such interactions help or hinder moral action, and constructing ethics theories that suggest how to influence these relationships in ways that reinforce ethical principles and concepts. This article sets forth the theoretical foundation for future media ethics research that is multidimensional, largely inductive, and informed by the latest developments in moral psychology as well as the application of virtue science in other fields. The proposed model provides an avenue of media ethics research and theorizing that would be a valuable quantitative and holistic supplement to the explicative and philosophy-oriented theorizing that dominates the field.

Media ethics has grown into a field of study in its own right over the last several decades, and required courses on the subject have become standard in college journalism and communication curricula across the country. Yet scholarship in the area can still be divided into various disparate bodies of work. One is rooted in media sociological, quantitative efforts that attempt to bridge descriptive work with normative claims, primarily through content analysis or on the individual and organizational levels of analysis (e.g., Hayes, Singer, & Ceppos, 2007; Keith, Schwalbe, & Silcock, 2006; Kuhn, 2007; St. John, 2008; Weaver et al., 2007). Another is characterized by philosophical explication that seeks to provide normative, yet largely abstract, virtue ethics-based frameworks for responsible practice (e.g., Borden, 2007; Christians, Ferré, & Fackler, 1993; Gunkel, 2007; Marsh, 2006). The search to identify and emphasize universal philosophical principles as a way to refine communication ethics theory and ensure its relevance in an increasingly globalized media system has preoccupied many theorists (Christians, 2008b, 2008c, 2010; Christians & Cooper, 2009; Ward, 2010; Ward & Wasserman, 2008). An ethic of universal being, which leading theorist Clifford Christians argues must drive media ethics theory, is “held together by a pretheoretical commitment to the purposiveness of life in nature, defined in human terms as the sacredness of life,” referring to his widely embraced notion of proto-norms (2008a, p. 7). This development is important for the maturation of media ethics theory. Its normative focus on universal commonality provides an important foundation and justification for bringing longstanding ethical principles to bear on diverse socioeconomic and cultural

contexts, and provides compelling rhetoric in the battle against moral relativism. Yet the deductive, quasi-theological assumptions arguably run counter to the more multidimensional, pluralistic picture of moral agency being constructed in cognitive and moral psychology. By setting forth a theoretical foundation for a more inductive approach, there is no intent here to minimize the problems of empiricism or to sidestep the inherent limitations of efforts to “quantify” knowledge and experience using arbitrary, fixed conditions. The perils of logical positivism are real: When knowledge is reduced to observable experience, human understanding is unacceptably impoverished. Qualitative methodologies “enlarge the universe of human discourse,” Clifford Geertz said (1973, p. 14). At its worst, the worship of scientism transforms the means of inquiry into a tyrannical, technicist end in itself, as Jacques Ellul (1964) so famously argued. David Hume and many other critics have well noted the flaws of a strict empiricism. Cornelius Benjamin framed how empiricist claims fail to account for the depth and range of what constitutes knowledge:

The empiricist insists upon an operational formulation of his position, yet he professes that a great many of the operations are unknown. He claims that ideas are operationally defined—in fact, unless they are operationally defined they are essentially meaningless—yet he admits his inability to specify what these operations are. Even more significantly, he forgets that until an idea has acquired meaning it cannot be verified; while the manner of verification becomes part of the meaning of an idea, it cannot determine the meaning of that idea in the first place. Thus the empiricist in resorting to unconscious and unstable operations is acknowledging the basic unintelligibility of his position; he is admitting that he is committed to vagueness and confusion in the expression of ideas. (1943, p. 16)

All human activity is interpretive, and much of what is accepted as knowledge defies the empiricist framework. Clifford Christians and James Carey (1981), and others have eloquently described the power and essential nature of nonquantitative modes of research. The social-psychological approach set forth here is intended to augment both the rich conceptualizing power of more qualitative approaches and the deductive, normative claims about universal principles in media ethics theory. “It is a matter of empirical facts and not of metaphysical speculation that we touch life in terms of patterns, connections and relationships which constitute for us the meaning of our experiences and indeed our lives,” according to Rickman (1961, p. 30). Rather than provide merely a descriptive ethics, this model is offered as a basis to develop an interpretive analysis of those connections and relationships. In their adaptation of Jonathan Haidt’s model of moral intuition and social influence for a science engineering education context, Huff and Frey argue that an “adequate” approach to moral psychology will integrate variables of individual intuitive assessments, effective persuasion reasoning, and personal judgment. “It will treat moral judgment as the product

of a dual processing system that mixes affect and cognition in both processes. It will treat moral action as the interaction of situational pressures, personal moral commitments (of various kinds), and the social moral-support system” (2005, pp. 393–394). Media ethics researchers and theorists are exploring the intersection of character and culture, the nature of universal principles, the effects of sociological and organizational influences on decision making, and the manifestations of normative standards. In these and other areas, theorists have the potential to construct new models of knowledge that are both philosophically grounded and empirically robust.

The tensions between normative theorizing and inductive inquiry are the subject of vast moral philosophy literature. The empiricist implications of the model proposed here are no doubt contentious. For one, it can be considered to raise fundamental challenges to the importance of rationality in ethical decision making. Yet by exploring measurable components of a moral life, that is, one’s traits, value systems, ethical ideologies, level of moral development, and so forth, we need not abandon the value of deliberation. Through more inductive inquiry we will more likely enrich our understanding of the nature of that deliberation. It might also be countered that such an approach for research in moral agency rests on intuitionism to an unacceptable degree. The longstanding debate over the validity of and reliance upon intuitionism will not be resolved here. Though often conflated by intuitionist critics, it is helpful to note the critical distinction made by Robert Audi in his compelling articulation of a “reconstructed Rossian” moral epistemology between our ability to apprehend the truth of a proposition that is self-evident and our ability to discern its self-evidence. “As moral agents we need intuitive knowledge of our duties; we do not need intuitive (or even other) knowledge of the [self-evident] status of the principles of duty,” Audi argues. “[T]he primary role of intuition is to give us direct, that is, noninferential, knowledge or justified belief of the *truth*, rather than of the self-evidence, of moral propositions” (1997, p. 38). Indeed, the theory of universal proto-norms long advocated by Christians and others—the call referred to earlier for a “pretheoretical commitment to the purposiveness of life” as the basis for media ethics theory—can itself be considered an intuitionist model according to Audi’s four characteristics of intuitions, the fourth of which describes their “pretheoretical” nature (p. 41). The model proposed here embraces Audi’s construction of “ethical reflectionism” and his argument that “our basic moral knowledge, even of prima facie duties, comes from reflection on particular cases, especially those calling for moral decision, where those cases are properly conceived in terms of their repeatable features. Our basic moral knowledge does not come from reflection on abstract, universal moral propositions . . .” (1997, pp. 36–37).

The present state of media ethics research, dominated by deductive theorizing, is in particular need of efforts to rigorously explore the nature of the “facts” of ethical deliberation. Both approaches are critical components of the process of

inquiry, as Tichenor and others have long insisted. Each approach can serve as a means of challenging assumptions on which the other might rest. “Rejecting a *rigid* deductive approach to the process does not mean denying the importance of either deductive logic or of hypotheses. Both are basic to research,” Tichenor wrote. “It is more reasonable, however, to recognize that a deductive chain of reasoning is often a *reconstructed* logic, imposed on a set of statements that themselves were arrived at by both induction *and* deduction” (1981, p. 19) [original emphases]. Linda Steiner, in her compelling critique of Christians’ “faith-informed” (Christians, 2010, p. 150), proto-norm-seeking scholarship, illuminates the concerns of resting on his deductive universalism and suggests the necessity of further inductive work:

In the very moment of explicitly endorsing universal master norms, we can fail to consider how people of good will can sincerely disagree over their substantive meanings. . . . Just as no clear line divides principles for problem-solving and moral virtues/character, so no clear line divides normative theory and applied ethics. . . . [I]f the slower ground-up process would be more effective both in shoring up the inevitable leakiness of global claims and embedding this sense of mutuality into head, heart, spirit, then the difficult work involved in this process might be well spent. (2010, pp. 113, 116, 117)

Moral philosophers and ethicists generally have relied upon empiricist claims often without an adequate grounding in, and perhaps even shunning, the social science literatures—a state that has hindered ethics theorizing, Doris and Stich argue:

The thought that moral philosophy can proceed unencumbered by facts seems to us an unlikely one: there are just too many places where answers to important ethical questions require—and very often presuppose—answers to empirical questions. . . . [T]hese literatures are often deeply relevant to important debates, and it is therefore intellectually irresponsible to ignore them. (2005, pp. 115, 116)

At the very least, we must recognize the implicit challenge of moral psychology to the trend in media ethics theorizing of championing the universal:

Thinking of normative ethical knowledge as something to be gleaned from thinking about human good relative to particular ecological niches will make it easier for us to see that there are forces of many kinds, operating at many levels, as humans seek their good; that individual human good can compete with the good of human groups and nonhuman systems; and finally, that only some ethical knowledge is global—most is local, and appropriately so. (Flanagan, Sarkissian, & Wong, 2008, p. 19)

The apparent disconnect between the dominance of moralistic explication in media ethics and the trends of psychological research poses a challenge and an

opportunity in the maturation of media ethics theory. Systematic efforts to bring moral-psychology measures to bear on media sociology are beginning to emerge (Coleman & Wilkins, 2009; Hanitzsch, 2007; Hanitzsch et al., 2010; Plaisance & Skewes, 2003; Wilkins & Coleman, 2005). Further efforts to bridge the two approaches would develop a clearer notion of moral agency in media by situating the moral philosophy literature within a project of psycho-social assessment. Such efforts could contribute to the field of media ethics by strengthening the empirical basis used to make normative and predictive claims about media practice.

These efforts should also be informed by a burgeoning body of neuroethics research that has explored how different parts of the brain “light up” or exhibit increased blood flow when subjects are presented with different types of ethical dilemmas using magnetic imaging techniques such as functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) (e.g., Fehr & Camerer, 2007; Greene et al., 2004; McGuire et al., 2009; Moll & de Oliveira-Souza, 2007; Spitzer et al., 2007). In one of these efforts, the researchers concluded that “neural activity in classically ‘cognitive’ brain regions predicts a particular type of moral judgment behavior, thus providing strong support for the view that both ‘cognitive’ and emotional processes play crucial and sometimes mutually competitive roles” (Greene et al., pp. 396–397). This groundbreaking work challenges assumptions in ethics theory about the nature of moral development, the function of free will, the homogeneity of ethical dilemmas, the usefulness of using scenarios to gauge ethical decision making, and even the deliberative nature of how people respond to ethical dilemmas. The implications for media ethicists and practitioners are just now beginning to be addressed (Wilkins, 2008).

## PSYCHOLOGY AND VIRTUE THEORY IN MEDIA

This article sets forth the theoretical underpinnings for a comprehensive model that illuminates the conditions required for virtuous work in media. In addition to bringing sociological and philosophical frameworks to bear on news work, it utilizes the emerging body of moral psychology work that offers a multi-dimensional explanation of virtue and that has enriched our understanding of what constitutes moral commitment as a component guiding moral action. The model’s combination of well-established empirical psychological instruments and its use of virtue theory to account for character traits (e.g., patience, empathy, integrity) open a promising avenue for media ethics theorizing. The link between virtue theory and moral psychology was made as early as 1958, when Anscombe sought to shift the focus of the philosophy of ethics away from systems analysis to the concept of virtue. Most recently, Appiah (2008) articulated the relationship between moral psychology and virtue ethics, which, according to Doris and

Stich, typically left the notion of “character” unanalyzed beyond a simplistic disposition to act in a certain way (2005, pp. 116–123). Virtuous action, as more applied ethics research is suggesting, is not contingent on character *or* context, but on the complex interchange between character *and* context. As Solomon, a contemporary philosopher, notes, “circumstances and character cannot be pried apart and should not be used competitively as alternative explanations of virtuous or vicious behavior” (2005, p. 654).

As Huff, Barnard, and Frey (2008a, 2008b) note in their study of computing ethics, most models of ethical behavior are unidimensional, emphasizing either principled reasoning or a straightforward model of integrity and character. In contrast, their model provides a fuller picture of moral action. Its empirical approach, adapted for professional environments beyond its application to computing ethics, also has the potential of helping media ethicists reaffirm and/or refine broad, universalist, normative claims about media practice. Huff, Barnard and Frey describe their model as informed by contemporary virtue theory and one that documents “moral action in social context”:

The four-component model . . . grounds moral action in relatively stable personality characteristics, guides moral action based on the integration of morality into the self-system, shapes moral action by the context of the surrounding moral ecology, and facilitates moral action with morally relevant skills and knowledge. . . . The model seeks to explain the daily performance of moral action . . . and to illuminate the ways that . . . professionals might be trained to be more active, ethically committed, and ethically effective in their daily performance, across the lifespan of their careers.” (2008b, p. 285)

The National Science Foundation-supported model, constructed with data from both quantitative survey and qualitative interview research, studied “moral exemplars” in the computer science field. The authors developed a “model of virtue that incorporates recent understandings of both internal and situational influences on sustained moral action” (2008a, p. 252). The model proposed here for virtuous media practice represents a modified version of their four-component model of successful moral action. The model proposed here suggests the story of the self, rooted in recent narrative theory research, as a critical fifth component. The model calls for gathering data through extensive interviewing and surveying of exemplars in various media sectors—Pulitzer and Peabody award-winning journalists, respected public relations veterans and rising stars, influential bloggers, and online personalities—which then can be used to construct a virtue theory framework for media practice. The model not only accounts for work environment and external influences on decision making (what is referred to as the moral ecology) but also personal traits, patterns of behavior, and key themes of constructed life narratives. Media sociologists and media ethicists have begun to investigate several of the domains identified by Huff and colleagues

but largely in isolation from each other. This project begins with the claim that these domains interact and should be viewed holistically as a systemic yet quantifiable construct in which virtuous work is most likely to occur. Structured interview and extended survey data from exemplars provide an approach to illuminate and contextualize both media professionals' manifestations of virtue in their work as well as the nature of their ethical deliberation for specific types of moral quandaries (e.g., issues of privacy, transparency, conflict of interest, sourcing). Data-gathering efforts for a pilot study based on the proposed model are presently under way. As demonstrated by the work of Gardner and colleagues (2001) and more recent journalism and public relations credibility crises, questions regarding the cultivation and discouragement of virtuous work among media workers have become urgent in the media and communication fields. The present transitional stresses of the journalism industry present a timely opportunity for the application of such a model in journalism studies. This model's focus on specific areas to be studied does not suggest these areas are the only legitimate ones available for more holistic lines of research in media ethics. The possibilities of harnessing theoretical links and validated instruments from the subfields within social psychology are numerous. But it is meant to suggest that the need to do so is critical for the continued maturation of the field.

## A FIVE-COMPONENT MODEL

### Story of the Self

Implicit in the narratives people tell about themselves is a moral perspective, that is, a suggestion regarding the nature of moral agency that manifests itself through actions and judgments about "good" and "bad," Alisdair MacIntyre (1981) and others have argued. While the study and collection of narratives has a long history—think Freud's study of dream narratives at the turn of the century and Jung's work on universal life myths in the 1930s—researchers began developing narrative studies as a field of personality psychology in the 1970s. Erik Erikson's work was key in constructing the concept of the psychosocial self both as a "subjective sense as well as an observable quality" (1975, p. 18). The area has since matured into a rigorous line of work that offers a range of interview and coding protocols and revealed compelling relationships among personality traits, values, narrative themes, and degrees of social integration. Narrative theories of generativity, redemption, and adaptation have been validated by a generation of studies involving children and adolescents, mothers of Down Syndrome children, alcoholics, convicted felons, highly religious gays and lesbians, and the architect Frank Lloyd Wright (see de St. Aubin, 1998;

Halbertal & Koren, 2006; King & Hicks, 2006; Maruna, 2001; McLean & Thorne, 2003; Singer, 2005). In their study of moral exemplars among computer science professionals, Huff and colleagues coded life-story narratives to discern significant distinctions between identified *craftpersons* focused on how to best serve clients and users and *reformers* more intent on addressing organizational or social injustices (Huff & Barnard, 2009, p. 50; see also Huff & Rogerson, 2005). Researchers have found significant correlations between life narrative themes and core personality traits such as extroversion and openness to experience (McAdams et al., 2004).

## Personality

As a psychological construct, personal traits have been conceptualized and validated as “dimensions of individual differences in tendencies to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feeling and actions” (McCrae & Costa, 1990, p. 23). A series of empirical analyses over the decades has developed five robust personality traits that theorists trace to evolutionary adaptiveness. The NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI) and other condensed versions are widely considered to be reliable measures of what are referred to as the Big 5 traits:

- *Extraversion*. Roccas and colleagues (2002) suggested that people who exhibit extravert features prioritize achievement and stimulation over adherence to tradition. Huff and colleagues suggest that the trait of extraversion “might help support a particular kind of moral excellence that involves leadership and facilitating change in society” (2008a, p. 256).
- *Neuroticism*. This measure of “negative emotional reactivity” is related to capacity for information acquisition and prevalence of short-sighted decision-making. Huff and colleagues found that their moral exemplars scored significantly lower on neuroticism measures than expected, and they speculated that high scorers may also exhibit difficulties in other areas examined with their moral agency model, such as moral imagination and perseverance (Huff et al., 2008a, p. 256).
- *Agreeableness*. While not a nominal indicator of virtue, this trait is tied to the expression of virtue and has variously been called social adaptability, likeability, friendly compliance, and love (John & Srivastava, 1999). However, as Flanagan illustrated in his discussion of saints and virtue (1991), agreeableness and saintliness are often not at all correlational.
- *Openness*. While its connection to virtuous action may not be readily apparent, Huff and colleagues noted that different types of professional moral exemplars exhibited contrasting degrees of openness to experiences: so-called craftpersons had higher scores than the reformers. Also, both are likely to interact with other environmental factors assessed in their model.

- *Conscientiousness*. High scores on this dimension have been tied to success in the workplace and career and other attributes, and thus may reflect the premium placed on good work among media professionals, particularly in the present climate of heightened public scrutiny.

Thus, unlike other concepts such as values (which are addressed below), traits are what psychologists have called enduring dispositions: “Traits describe ‘what people are like’ rather than the intentions behind their behavior” (Roccas et al., 2002, p. 790). While these general traits have been found to be stable across populations, there are competing theories regarding their structure. Some studies treat them as conceptually independent, while others emphasize specific relationships.

### Internalization of Morality By the Self

Social psychology literature refers to the notion of “moral commitment” as a key trait of exemplars and conscientious professionals. In contrast to earlier assumptions that individuals exhibit moral commitment through cross-situational consistency, more recent research has documented a resilient *inconsistency* among moral exemplars as well as a variety of discrete moral motivations. Recent work (Colby & Damon, 1992; Mischel, Shoda, & Mendoza-Denton, 2002; Shoda & Mischel, 1998) has compellingly suggested that moral commitment should be understood as the ability to make fine distinctions among situations, rather than a reflection of consistent belief and action—the ability to confront different scenarios with flexibility in expectations, appraisals and emotions, yet still remaining anchored by one’s larger moral commitments.

Research into values has an extensive history in sociology and social psychology and has culminated in a body of theory that suggests individuals conduct their lives according to a “value system,” that is, “a hierarchical arrangement of values, a rank-ordering of values along a continuum of importance” (Rokeach, 1968, p. 551). The notion of values as a social construct has been developed by theorists as a useful way to assess motivations, cross-cultural differences, and individual dispositions. As Schwartz and others have stated, values (1) are concepts or beliefs, (2) pertain to desirable end states or behaviors, (3) transcend specific situations, (4) guide selection or evaluation of behavior and events, and (5) are ordered by relative importance (Schwartz, 1992, p. 4). “The value concept, more than any other, should occupy a central position . . . able to unify the apparently diverse interests of all the sciences concerned with human behavior,” stated one of the foremost value theorists, Milton Rokeach (1973, p. 3). In the last 40 years, research suggests that the link between values and behavior is identifiable and often significant (Burgess, 1992; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987).

Value theory research has resulted in a circumplex model of values (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004) that reflects the complexity of moral commitment and the diversity of moral motivation. Extensive testing and cross-cultural sampling has confirmed 10 broad “value types,” each of which is composed of multiple discrete values: self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, spirituality, and universalism. Further, these value clusters are dynamically related to each other. The 56-value model uses a value-rating scale that is generalizable and resistant to social-desirability responses. A more modest value-assessment instrument tailored to journalistic professionalism (Plaisance & Skewes, 2003) suggested relationships among certain values and journalists’ conceptualization of their watchdog role in society.

### Moral Ecology

Huff, Barnard, and Frey (2008b) suggest the term moral ecology to refer to the situational influence exerted by an organizational or working environment, which simultaneously shapes and is shaped by individual actors. Most decisions or behaviors that feature an ethical dimension occur within broader contexts of culture, motive and relationship networks.

“The term moral ecology encourages us to consider the complex web of relationships and influences, the long persistence of some factors and the rapid evolution of others, the variations in strength and composition over time, the micro-ecologies that can exist within larger ones, and the multidirectional nature of causality in an ecology” (2008b, p. 286). Indeed, failure to fully account for influences of moral ecology has been a central criticism of character-based approaches in moral psychology. (Doris, 2002; Appiah, 2008)

The model of virtuous action in media offered here would utilize two instruments suggested by Huff and colleagues (2008a, 2008b), one of which would be modified to better address questions of media practice, and would also add a third. Taken together, these provide a fruitful way to plumb the complexity of one’s perceived moral ecology and to explore exemplars’ efforts and adaptations that help them succeed within it.

- Victor and Cullen’s (1988) Ethical Climate Questionnaire (ECQ), which was developed to assess the ethical dimensions of organizational culture. The ethical climates mapped through the ECQ, they argue, “identify normative systems that guide organizational decision-making and the systemic responses to ethical dilemmas” (p. 123).
- The Defining Issues Test (DIT) (Rest, 1974, 1986), which measures the nature of moral reasoning that is endorsed when given different scenarios. The project would take advantage of the developments implemented

by Wilkins and Coleman (2005, 2009) in their studies that incorporated journalism- and public relations-specific scenarios into the DIT instrument. Of particular interest is the sub-scale within the DIT called the d-score, which measures principled reasoning. Some research has suggested that as individuals become more inculcated into an organizational structure, his or her d-score decreases (presumably to reflect the consensus about moral reasoning within the ecology) (Huff et al., 2008b, p. 294).

- The Forsyth Ethics Position Questionnaire (EPQ) (1980), which measures degrees of idealism and relativism through respondent assessments of 20 statements. The Forsyth instrument has only recently been used to explore the ethical proclivities of media professionals and students (Hanitzsch et al., 2010; Kim & Choi, 2003; Plaisance, 2007) and is highly indicative of how individuals are likely to approach and resolve ethical dilemmas.

### Moral Skills and Knowledge

“The highest praise we might muster for the morally committed incompetent would be ‘well-intentioned’ rather than ‘virtuous,’” Huff and colleagues wrote. “Skills and knowledge are essential to the effective practice of virtue” (2008b, pp. 295–296). However, not only do skill sets and bodies of knowledge required for moral action vary widely across professions, but also researchers have documented the difficulty in discerning consensus on requisite skills among professional colleagues. Consistent, conscientious morally motivated behavior involves a range of skills and requisite knowledge, such as the ability to anticipate potential ethical dilemmas and identifying and weighing the merits of possible solutions and justifications. In reviewing research examining the moral dimensions of personality, the concepts of self-control, perseverance, and willpower are recurring values (Blasi, 2005; Pritchard, 1998), but any such list of skills or values is often unsystematic. Researchers also caution that efforts to quantify a “canonical” list of skill sets can threaten to marginalize the functions of the other four components of the model. But drawing from a range of research examining such skills, they focus on skills of self-regulation, whistleblowing, ability to deal with ambiguity, empathy, and accurate self-knowledge.

Psychologists and researchers in other fields have come to understand that a large amount of human behavior is governed by cognitive systems characterized by varying degrees of automaticity (e.g., Bargh, 1989; Haidt, 2001). Colby and Damon (1992) demonstrated that people who display extraordinary moral commitments rarely report engaging in extensive, agonized decision-making processes; they “just knew” what was required of them. Still, drawing on research into expert and novice statuses, Narvaez and Lapsley note that “unlike novices, experts know *what* knowledge to access, *which* procedures to apply, *how* to

apply them, and *when* it is appropriate. In other words, experts have a greater amount of conditional knowledge. Experts apply complex rules and heuristics in solving a problem and use automatized routines. Their tacit knowledge or intuition is well-trained and complements their explicit knowledge” (2005, p. 151) [original emphasis]. Narvaez and her colleagues have identified the characteristic skills of persons with good character, extending Rest’s (1973) four psychologically distinct processes identified through the DIT: ethical sensitivity, ethical judgment, ethical motivation, and ethical action. This “provides a holistic understanding of the moral person, who is able to demonstrate keen perception and perspective taking, skilled reasoning, moral motivational orientations, and skills for completing moral action” (Narvez & Lapsley, 2005, p. 155).

## CONCLUSION

The well-developed and sophisticated social science tools proposed to investigate each of the theoretical dimensions of virtuous work open a promising opportunity to provide a fuller, normative explanation for what constitutes moral action in media and how it might be more consistently cultivated. How do journalists’ perceptions of autonomous agency interact with corporate culture? What skill sets are apparent among exemplary veteran, “mainstream” journalists compared with those seen as emerging leaders of the online news and blogging cultures? How do public relations professionals conceptualize harms, and how are those notions reconciled with a sense of public service? In what ways might internalized moral imperatives seen in exemplars suggest more effective cultivation of a moral ecology in the newsroom and around the PR agency conference table? These and other questions that this model is designed to address speak directly to the concerns about supports for and constraints on virtue presented by today’s media system. Clifford Christians claims in a recent journal issue devoted to the legacy of his indispensable scholarship, “Media ethics is rooted in Enlightenment rationalism, and therefore emphasizing personal decision making, cannot serve journalism with its global reach and technological complexity” (2010, p. 144). This normative claim may well be true insofar as it limits its focus to a rigid logical positivism that marginalizes the validity of his proto-norms—a focus, not incidentally, that is arguably far from emblematic of media ethics research. This shortcoming of media ethics theorizing that Christians notes occurs when we leave unexamined the empiricist claims of classical Enlightenment thought—the ontological nature of Kantian rationalism, the myopic, atomistic frameworks of Mill and Locke.

As with every other area of study, humanist or scientist, true research is *a process of traveling through and surveying what is discerned*. Media ethics research must continue to develop lines of inquiry as much as it pursues the

validation of proto-norms and other moral claims. It must study human qualities and the human condition closely, while also parsing the quasi-mystical words of Levinas. Notwithstanding the questionable assumptions of Enlightenment thought, a rich vein of ways to thoughtfully question human beliefs, motivations and behavior awaits media ethics researchers.

Far from offering a poor descriptive substitute for the normative theorizing needed in media ethics, the approach proposed here is an endeavor of interpretive ethics that reflects much of the activity in neuroethics and moral psychology research. We are beginning to understand neural firing patterns in the context of processing moral dilemmas. We are gaining new knowledge about cognitive processes that promise to refine our understanding of the nature of rationality. We are refining some key elements of moral agency and identifying important environmental and developmental influences on one's behavior. How might assumptions about deliberation and free will in classical ethics theory be reconciled with this new knowledge? How might the forces themselves that shape our moral lives be influenced to reflect a stronger affinity with ethics theory? In the field of media ethics, energies committed to philosophical theorizing and social science cannot represent a zero-sum game. Each continually expands the horizons of the other. Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork* can easily be read as a continuous internal, often uneven, dialogue, full of tangents, reconsiderations, and reformulations; he states his categorical imperative in three successive constructions. Much of the best contemporary philosophical theorizing reflects attempts to bring classical principles to bear on new knowledge. One the key aims of Lawrence Kohlberg's social science research resulting in his theory of moral development was to defeat ethical relativism on psychological grounds. The relationship between the fields should be discursive rather than mutually exclusive. Far from setting aside the tenets of classical philosophy, moral psychology research opens new opportunities to understand, engage, and influence the conditions helping or hindering our behavior so that they might more clearly reflect our ethical principles.

The powerful forces now reshaping the media system, including globalization, technological shifts, and economic restructuring, pose extraordinary challenges and opportunities for media ethics theory. The very multidimensionality of these transformative forces require theorists to utilize a wider range of tools to capture the complexity of media practice to supplement, and in some cases refine, the normative frameworks we so often advocate. This model, drawing from a selection of such tools, is not intended to be considered definitive and is not intended to denigrate the strains of normative theorizing that largely dominate the field. But its spirit of more empirically based assessment of key elements of ethical practice is intended to suggest a way for media ethics research to better "understand the moral quality," as Blasi challenged, to illuminate how exactly we might "count on ethics to help us address problems," as Linda Steiner reminds

us (2010, p. 116). Harnessing these tools also is arguably necessary for grounded media ethics theorizing if the field is to continue to mature.

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