



Using Case Studies in Communication and Media Ethics Courses

Case studies are a common way of introducing or reinforcing themes in a range of classes, including those on communication and media. They also are an engaging way to build skills of respectful disagreement over important issues. They can serve as follow-ups to other materials on ethical theory or they can be used on their own to bring up overlooked ethical implications. They can be used in a course entirely focused on the ethics of media or communication, or they can be used to add a partial focus on ethics to a range of communication, journalism, or media courses. For instance, one may lecture on the ethics of trust in the news media, and then use a case study on sports blogging and trust. Alternatively, one might lecture on the various types of sports blogging and use a case study as a focus for discussion over the ethical issues concerning sports blogging. Either way, case studies are great ways to evoke discussion over difficult ethical issues.

What are case studies? Case studies are typically narrative accounts that involve characters (or parties) and at least one decision to be made that will significantly affect multiple parties. Typically, there are competing interests on each side of this decision—reasons for taking that action, and reasons against doing that action. If a case study is about forcibly revealing anonymous sources to safeguard national security, the interests are clearly oppositional: journalistic integrity (promises of confidentiality to one’s sources) and the interests of preserving our nation’s security (perhaps in times of war). The actions or decisions that serve as the focus of case studies are typically of two kinds: either they have already been made or they are yet to be made. The former type of cases will get students discussing the action a specified agent did in the case study, whereas the latter type ends with an unfinished situation—the students must then decide what an agent’s next move will be. Both types of case studies can be hypothetical or based on real occurrences.

How might one use case studies in their class? Some teachers use case studies to do two things. First, students can be tasked with identifying the ethical interests at conflict in the decision made or to be made in the case study at hand. What is the decision that is ethically problematic here? What reasons or interests do you immediately see for both sides of this controversy? Cultivating sensitivity to the various sides to an ethical issue develops the sort of charity and sympathy many see as vital features to an ethical decision-maker. And often, our first reaction is not our most justified or defensible reaction after we think about our reasons for a bit. Second, students can be asked to develop a position on the decision made or to be made—what should the agent do (or what should they have done)? More importantly, why is that the right action to take? This part goes deeper than merely noting interests on both sides of this controversy, as students are asked to argue for why one interest or value takes priority over another interest or value. Sometimes, there are creative solutions that can be envisioned to address all the concerns in the case study.

The fundamental point to the use of case studies in teaching ethics is to provoke discussion, questioning, and argument. They are not primarily used to solve problems, convey settled principles, prove certain theories, and so forth. Many instructors use them in the following



way. Students are put into small groups and asked to read the case study. Each group talks over the case, directed by instructor prompts or the “discussion” questions listed at the end of many case studies. Following this, the instructor brings the entire class together and discusses what each group thought about each starting question. Students might then be encouraged to engage in reason-based discussion and debate about the case decisions in question. Disagreement, when it leads to the comparison and analysis of justifying reasons and values, is a welcome sign in using case studies to teach ethics. The instructor may conclude discussion with a summary of the interests and positions debated by students, but rarely is there one right answer (and set of reasons) that gains reasoned acceptance by all. Learning the process of critical ethical thinking and reasoned disagreement is one of the main ends of using case studies.

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