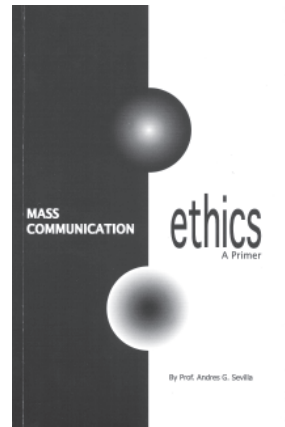


## Mapping the Ethics of Media Practice

*Fernando A. Austria, Jr.*



Book Review of

### ***Mass Communication Ethics: A Primer***

By Andres G. Sevilla

Quezon City: Great Books Publishing  
2007 (106 pp)

---

**I**n his book *Mass Communication Ethics: A Primer*, Prof. Andres G. Sevilla stresses, “The media professional who is vested with power is at the same time saddled with responsibility” (2). Sevilla writes from his experience as an academician who teaches an undergraduate course in ethics at the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication (UP CMC). The primer is the product of almost 20 years of teaching, “a distillation of knowledge and experience in the field.”

In today’s media environment, especially with the development of new media technologies, a media practitioner not only shapes the form but at the same time controls the content of these technologies. Sevilla explains, “The media practitioner ceases to be a private individual and becomes a public person, commanding a considerable amount of power and influence on the minds and hearts and actions of a significant number of people” (1). Given this situation, the author intends to “help the media,

information, and communication technology users employ strategic knowledge resources prudently to gain the most benefits and avoid harms to themselves and others.” Thus, there remains a need to teach ethics “to train future media practitioners not only technically and intellectually but also morally” (105).

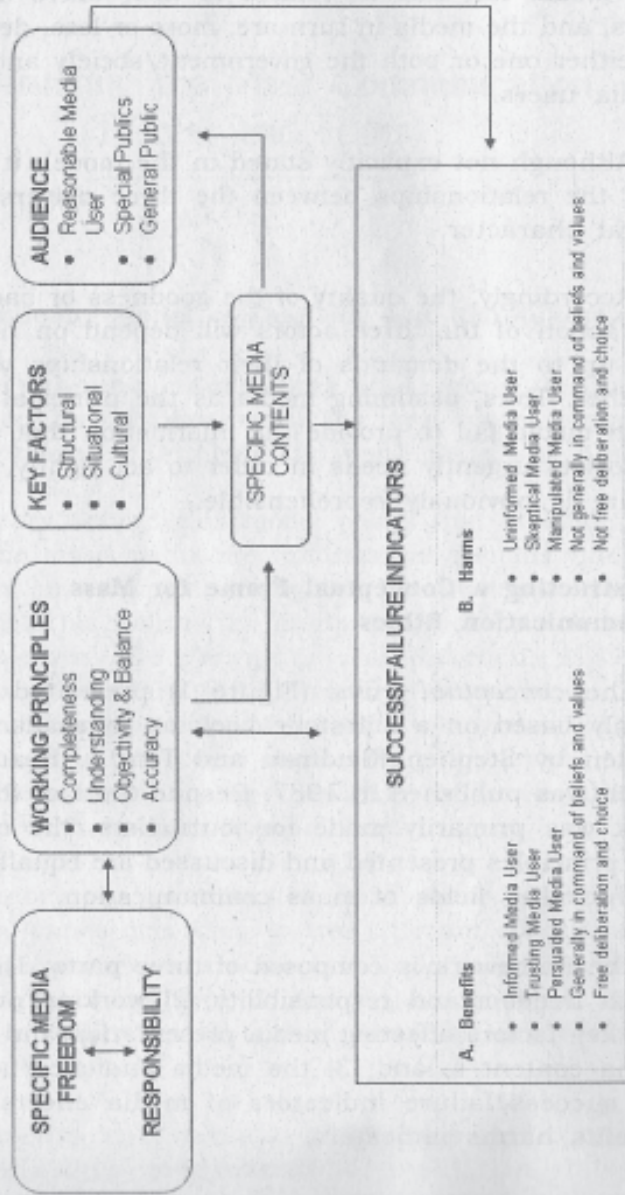
Ethics, according to Jaksa and Pritchard, “refers to the study of a vast array of practical concerns that, although familiar to us, nevertheless are often not clearly understood and are often subject to much controversy” (1994: 5).

Practical concerns warrant a practical book. Sevilla’s work, mainly intended to be a textbook, maps out the different concerns or concepts that a student of Mass Communication would have to know in relation to ethics. The primer enables students to have a quick appreciation of the course and gives them the salient points towards understanding ethical concerns that are often controversial.

Divided into three parts – Foundation, Ethics in Mass Communication, and Case Studies – the primer covers the breadth of the study in a simple, easily understandable manner. It can be likened to a crib sheet or one of those popular series of books that summarizes complicated academic subjects into easily digestible tome.

Very useful in this primer is the conceptual framework for Mass Communication Ethics that Sevilla developed which can be found on page 22 (See Figure 1). Based on the Dependency Model of De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach and the concepts of Klaidman and Beauchamp in their book *The Virtuous Journalist* (1987), Sevilla outlined all the key concepts needed to understand and appreciate media freedom and responsibility. In this conceptual model, the author establishes the relationships of those in media and their stakeholders, points out the working principles and key factors that affect ethical practices, and delineates the success and failure indicators of ethical media practices. With this model, students easily see that “the quality of the goodness or badness of the action of the three actors will depend on how they live up to the demands of their relationships with one another” (21).

Figure 1. A Conceptual Framework for Mass Communication Ethics  
 Andres G. Sevilla (1996) following Klaidman and Beauchamp (1987)



In the succeeding part, Sevilla puts theory into practice. In several case studies – ranging from journalists in hostage situations and using hidden cameras to reporting public opinion polls and making sex movies and children’s shows – he applies the principles and concepts detailed in his model to analyze and evaluate the harms and benefits (or the ethical impact, for that matter) of the actual situations. In these case studies, students are given the opportunity to appreciate how ethics is applied in the real world. With this primer, students are permitted to “refine [their] basic moral concept” (Jaksa & Pritchard, 1994: 4) by making the application of often complex, sometimes conflicting, moral principles appear less daunting.

The primer is written in a manner that makes what is familiar more tangible. Because concepts in this primer are easy to grasp, the apprehension of studying ethics, given its image of being a difficult subject in the academe, is lessened.

Considering that the purpose of the primer is to provide students with the moral quotient to assess incidence of harm and benefits and as such become ethical media practitioners, valuing this primer calls for considering how it meets the goals of studying applied ethics. How practical is this book for the practice of ethical behavior?

Jaksa and Pritchard (1994) found the following goals of teaching applied ethics, realistic and sensible: “(1) stimulating the moral imagination; (2) recognizing ethical issues; (3) eliciting a sense of moral obligation; (4) developing analytical skills; and (5) tolerating disagreement” (12).

Stimulating the moral imagination makes the media student ready to handle the ethical dimensions of any communication situation. It involves developing the foresight to avoid ethical dilemmas (Jaksa & Pritchard, 1994). The whole primer gives the students an overall picture of the ethical landscape. It provides the students the tools to discern situations that may potentially be ethically problematic. Specifically, Sevilla’s discussions on “Telling the Truth: Four Working Principles” (Chapter 6) and the “Threats

to Media Public Service and Trust” (Chapter 8), present situations wherein the future media practitioner can be faced with ethical predicaments. Sevilla stresses, “[T]he threat to the health of the profession is always highly possible and probable in certain cases” (p. 59). Apparently, the ultimate purpose of Sevilla’s book is to develop in the students a sense of “preventive ethics” (Jaksa & Pritchard, 1994: 13). Of course, stimulating the moral imagination of students goes beyond enumerating potentially problematic situations. The ability to discern such situations, which is often unclear and complicated, needs exposure. Probably a list of additional readings that provides illustrations of ethically problematic situations would lead to a better stimulation of students’ moral obligation.

The primer, with its presentation of the major concerns regarding applied ethics, gives the student the capacity to recognize ethical issues. The latter requires the ability to ascertain moral aspects of a given communication situation (Jaksa & Pritchard, 1994). For instance, in “Problems of Bias and Others” (Chapter 6), Sevilla elaborates on the use of evaluative language in articles that “may require a perspective that is value-laden” (44). He suggests that ethical issues, specifically the problems of manipulation, may arise when such materials are not substantially based on facts, fail to provide a deeper understanding of the subject, and when they are not properly identified and executed as interpretive in nature. Given the discussion, students become familiar with this type of ethical issue – allowing them to identify such situations. Jaksa and Pritchard (1994) also enumerated the following elements in the process of recognizing ethical issues: “appraising your immediate responses, identifying unstated assumptions, and asking whether a visceral response alone can be the basis of a moral judgment” (13).

With the case studies in the primer, students are given examples of this process of recognition. However, this gives no assurance that students will be able to go through the process themselves. Perhaps it is not the function of the primer, but it

makes a lot of practical sense if it presented cases that the students could evaluate. Moreover, the primer is slanted towards the practice of journalism – the concepts presented are issues that concern the ethical delivery of information. Although Sevilla provides case studies that are not specific to journalism (i.e., “Making Sex Flicks,” and “Children as Adult Comedians in ‘Goin’ Bulilit”), students still have to go through a longer and more difficult process of identifying ethical issues in other media practices like entertainment.

Eliciting a sense of moral obligation makes the students think of and reflect on ethical issues and take on the responsibility of their decisions and actions in a communication situation (Jaksa & Pritchard, 1994). Sevilla begins his chapter on social responsibility by paraphrasing the premise of the social responsibility theory: “freedom carries concomitant obligations; and media, which enjoys a privileged position under the government, is obliged to be responsible to society...” (25). His detailed presentation of the Social Responsibility Theory, as well as alternative normative theories of mass communication, introduces students to the responsibilities of media practitioners. In succeeding chapters, he explains the particulars of these responsibilities such as truthfulness and comprehensiveness. With these elaborations, the students become aware of their duties and obligations as future media practitioners. But awareness does not necessarily translate to a sense of moral obligation.

Sevilla succeeds in giving students the tools to build on their analytical skills. Chapters like “Basic Concepts and Principles,” and “Harm/Benefit Calculus” lead to an understanding of the basic principles and concepts of ethical behavior which Jaksa and Pritchard state as the start of developing analytical skills. They add that for students, it involves not only a familiarity with these ethical concepts but more importantly the ability to apply these in any given communication condition (Jaksa & Pritchard, 1994). Familiarity in applying these concepts is provided by Sevilla in his

case studies. But ensuring that students gain the ability to apply these concepts was not within the purview of the primer.

Tolerating disagreements involves the “ability to engage in reflective conversations with other” (Jaksa & Pritchard, 1994: 17) in instances where differing opinions on moral issues are put to the fore. In allowing for disagreements, students develop their ability to reflect on, evaluate, and be critical of communication situations. The primer, in many instances, informs students of the different instances of disagreements in the study and application of morality.

Again, Sevilla is successful in supplying the requisite information that introduces students to the subject. As a primer that aims to provide the necessary tools to understand morality, Sevilla accomplishes this in great detail in a language that can be easily comprehended by students. But understanding ethics is just the beginning of ethical behavior. Putting theory into practice requires another volume that aims to be practical.

## Note

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes come from the reviewed book.

## Reference

- Jaksa, J. A. & Pritchard, M. S. (1994). *Communication ethics: Methods of analysis* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Belmont California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

---

*Fernando A. Austria, Jr. is an assistant professor and chair of the Department of Broadcast Communication, University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication (UP CMC). He has more than 20 years of experience in writing, producing and directing commercials for radio, TV, and film. He completed his master's degree in Communication Research from UP CMC in 2006.*