

**A Discussion on Teaching & Ethics**  
**And**  
**Teaching Communication Ethics in the Digital Age**

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**ABSTRACT**

Communication in the digital age has raised so many interrelated questions about ethics. Communication ethics as a subfield of ethics has been dealing with personal, organizational and political aspects of media industries until the widespread use of digital communication. Since any person with appropriate technological tools has now become a content producer and provider, challenges in the field of teaching (communication) ethics became twofold, with producers of digital form and content in higher education and difficulties of teaching & ethics in one hand, and communication ethics and ethical discussions on digital form and content and difficulties of teaching communication ethics on the other hand. This paper focuses on these two interrelated and overlapping issues by relying on the experiences of communication and media studies scholars. The examples from experiences of media scholars provided in the first part indicate that the students in the example cases have become to treat higher education only as a means to reach one goal, which is, in brief, to find a job. In order to reach this goal, it seems that they do not feel obliged to follow certain ethical principles. In the second part, the topics that are discussed in this paper emphasize that visualized and digitalized media have taken over media industries, and they have become prevalent forms for specific segments of the public who have access to digital devices, and thus there is a current need to make a change in teaching ethics under the prevailing circumstances.

**Keywords:** communication ethics, teaching & ethics, digital media ethics

**Dijital Çağda Öğretim & Etik ve İletişim Etiği Öğretimi Üzerine Bir Tartışma**

**ÖZET**

Dijital çağda iletişim, etik konusunda birbiriyle ilişkili pek çok sorunun tartışılmasına neden olmuştur. Etik alanına ait bir alt kategori olarak İletişim Etiği, dijital iletişimin yaygın bir şekilde kullanılmaya başlandığı döneme kadar medya endüstrilerinin kişisel, kurumsal ve siyasal veçheleriyle ilgilenmiştir. Uygun teknolojik araçlara sahip her bireyin içerik üretici ve sağlayıcı olmasıyla birlikte iletişim etiği öğretmenin zorlukları ikili bir yapıya bürünmüştür; bir yandan yüksek öğretimde dijital form ve içerik üretici-kullanıcılarının olması ve öğretim ve etik tartışması, öte yandan ise dijital form ve içerik üzerine iletişim etiği öğretimi ve etik tartışmaların yürütülmesi. Bu çalışma, iletişim ve medya akademisyenlerinin deneyimlerinden yola çıkarak birbiriyle ilişkili ve örtüşen bu iki konuya odaklanmaktadır. Medya çalışmalarında çalışan akademisyenlerin deneyimleri üzerinden oluşturulan ilk bölümdeki örnekler,

öğrencilerin yüksek öğrenimi yalnızca amaçlarına, yani bir iş bulmalarına yarayacak bir araç olarak görmeye eğilimli olduklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu amaca ulaşmak için ise, örnek olaylardaki öğrencilerin herhangi bir etik ilkeye uyma ihtiyacı duymadıkları görülmektedir. Çalışmanın ikinci bölümünde ise görsel ve dijital medyanın özellikle dijital araçlara erişimi olan toplum kesimleri için medya endüstrisinde baskın hale geldiği, bu nedenle de var olan koşullar içinde iletişim etiği öğretme yöntemlerinde değişiklik yapılması gerektiğine işaret edilmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** iletişim etiği, öğretim & etik, dijital medya etiği

## Introduction

This paper is about two interrelated aspects, teaching & ethics, and teaching communication ethics in communication and media studies in the digital age. The paper starts with a brief theoretical summary on digital communication ethics, followed by sketching out certain aspects of the relationship between teaching and ethics. Within this conceptual framework, the first part of the discussion will focus on the difficulties lecturers consistently have to deal with such as plagiarism, pressures from the administration and families. The second part will concentrate on complexity of teaching communication ethics to students in the digital environment, who will soon become media professionals. Both issues will be analyzed through cases, which were selected from different communication scholars through personal communication. The names of the scholars, the universities they work for, the courses the cases are taken from and the name and gender of the students are kept anonymous to prevent any controversy in the future. I also have to mention that the individual cases that I have gathered here do not apply to all students, scholars, administrations of the universities and fellow colleagues. My aim is to highlight some extreme cases as well as others, which have already become mundane in academia, but to my belief still deserve our attention.

## Defining Digital Communication Ethics and the Relationship Between Communication and Ethics

We are constantly adapting our communication products and processes to the new digital technologies. In terms of ethics we need to think about the core ethical principles of communication. “Over the past 15 years, societies around the globe have witnessed an explosion of innovative cultural practices and forms that use emerging digital communication platforms to alter the processes of production, distribution and reception in ways that were technically impossible (and often unthinkable) in an era dominated by mass media” (Latonero & Sinnreich,

2014, p. 572). Hence, in this new era there are new dimensions of communication ethics, which are not limited to mass communication, but also include all relationships and processes that individuals, groups and organizations that are involved. Nick Couldry, Mirca Madianou and Amit Pinchevski (2013) also express a similar concern -as they pose the questions on limits of freedom of speech, media ethics and regulation as well as accountability and trust-: “(...) with an ethics of media is the sheer pervasiveness of the media not only as centralized institutions but also as technologies and means through which we sustain relationships with each other” (p.1).

The new dimensions that are brought to (mass) communication processes are innumerable, yet they have both pros and cons: “Digitization reduced production costs dramatically in many media industries. It offered enormous advantages in terms of compressing, storing, editing, copying and distributing communications. (...) It also allowed new forms of interconnectivity to take place” (Curran, 2010, p. 235). Since the digitization affected our ways to communicate with each other either through mass media or social and alternative media, the ways we think about communication ethics deserve a lengthy discussion.

Recent discussions on digital communication ethics and codes of media ethics by many ethicists revolve around similar questions such as whether or not the ethical codes and standards have changed accordingly and do the new technologies change our imagination as both media scholars and professionals as much as the public? A simple answer to these questions would be a need for revision in ethical standards, which rely on the basic principles. The technology might have changed, but two important aspects of communication remain the same: purpose and content.

David Gordon et.al. (2011) indicate that although the devices and the ways we use them have changed during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are still continuities both in functions and purposes: “The broad purposes of mediated communication –surveillance of the environment, persuasion, and entertainment, among others- remain much the same” (p.213). Therefore, there is a difference in the form, but not in the content; also there is a difference in the communication channels; the messages are delivered via newer, faster and cheaper devices, which, in turn, enable a greater number of people participating in the online distribution of information. Then, here another question arises; how did this capability affect the notion of responsibility? Hence, first we need to start by questioning whether or not the new dissemination channels of news and information would make us throw out the ethical standards that have permeated media forms for many years.

Many ethicists argue that the specifics of ethical behavior in this digital environment are open to debate; still the basic principles remain the same. But the new media technologies are bringing new situations into the debate. Jane B. Singer believes that “the basic ethical charges placed on journalism (and the purposes of most ethical systems) should and do apply to the new media –honesty, respect for others, independence, and accountability” (as cited in Gordon, et.al., p. 215). Of course, these concepts need to be rethought and revised. Since the term ‘audience’ has been replaced by the term ‘user’, the participation of ‘ordinary citizens’ in the (mass) communication process has increased so that there is a need for “transparency” as also claimed by Singer. On the other hand, another ethicist Michael Dorsher claims that current ethical principles/guidelines can still be applied to digital media with some minor revisions, but he also argues that:

(...) but must become more widespread to keep up with the content spread of content generators. He stresses the need for ethics training of ‘amateur’ journalists and touches briefly on whether hegemony (the concept that the people in power always win in negotiations about power) is increased in an online media environment. (as cited in Gordon, et.al., p. 215)

Dorsher also puts much importance in openness, transparency, and disclosure for both individuals and institutions using new communication channels.

There are also discussions about the future of journalism, a profession that provides necessary information to public to make informed choices as an important function of media. In this respect, Ari Heinonen (2005) takes two inclinations of journalists into account: “The first approach sees the Internet and what it represents (digital communication, interactivity, globality) as a turning-point in the history of journalism. This can be called a revolutionary inclination, which foresees drastic changes in the professional role and identity of journalists” (p. 135). This argument assumes that the traditional task of journalist will diminish accordingly. Yet the second inclination Heinonen points out and calls “evolutionary inclination” is rather about adapting journalistic practices to the digital age. According to this second approach, Internet, -hence digital media- “represents change but one that does not require dramatic re-evaluations of basic journalistic conventions including ethical values” (Heinonen, 2005, p. 136). Nick Couldry (2013) rightfully addresses the issue by indicating that the field of media ethics covers more than just journalism ethics, and posits three major arguments to show why there is a need for distinctive media ethics in the age of digital communication:

First, there is no ethics distinctive to a single medium, because media narratives –always to some degree, and emphatically now, in the digital age- involves references to other media content, often in different media formats (Hepp, 2010). Second, media ethics is broader than journalism ethics, by which I mean the already partly codified rules for institutionally empowered storytellers (journalists). Such codes are important and they have ethical content, but they emerge from particular institutional circumstances. (...) Third, there is still a need for a *media* ethics, as distinct from a general ethics of communication, that is the distinctive ethical issues raised by the institutional concentration of communicative resources that we call “media” (even still “the media) and the deeply embedded expectations we have of such institutions and our interactions with them. (p. 17-18)

Couldry argues that these issues are still valid even as we exchange information on the very same platforms that “we present our personal lives to our family and friends” (2013, p. 18).

On the other hand, Charles Ess (2011) discusses media ethics in the digital age at three distinct, yet interrelated levels, which refer to the drastically changed ethical landscapes. He argues that at the first level, there are “novel challenges in the domains of privacy, copyright, violence in games, easy access to pornography, etc.”. At the second level, Ess points out that these landscapes have more fundamental ethical frameworks that may settle some ethical challenges such as consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics, and/or other frameworks. But he goes on arguing that there is a more foundational discussion on ethical assumptions we need to take into consideration, and it composes the third level: “(...) assumptions at work regarding our sense of identity or selfhood, and what sorts of relationships, including relationships entailing ethical norms and obligations, such identity and selfhood may hold with Others.” Following this line of thought, Ess directs his attention to a more general problem, which is also what I am trying to discuss here; digital media ethics makes us confront with different new ethical issues, which are not necessarily at the first level but at “more foundational levels of ethical frameworks and the most difficult questions of human identity.”

While discussing the issues on newsgathering and privacy, Ginny Whitehouse (2010) argues that “[a]s information is increasingly easier to obtain, the need for clear expectations both in the virtual and real world is needed” (p.311). Her remark is related with the borderline between a journalist’s work and private spheres, which I believe that such need is still applicable to all types of digital communication matters. Whitehouse’s arguments make it clear that even if they are not followed all through the communication processes, the need for such codes are vital: “(...) codes

of ethics provide guidance to those not only across media platforms and management levels as well the public but also to those using a range of philosophical approaches to decision making” (2010, p. 314). The difficulty of media ethics is due to the range that it covers as Couldry, Madianou and Pinchevski (2013) argue: “The territory of media ethics is difficult: marked by branching paths, ambiguous directions and potholes into which the traveler can easily fall” (p.4). Adding all the elements involved in communication process to that wide territory makes ethical discussions even more complex. Bringing the discussion to the level of ethics and politics, Charles Ess (2011) raises an important question:

Especially given the correlation between oral cultures and hierarchical/authoritarian regimes, I will argue by way of conclusion that our most important ethical – indeed, political – choice with regard to digital media is how far we will use these media in ways that preserve individual selfhood as requisite for liberal-democratic regimes, and how far we may ‘amuse ourselves to [political] death’ (so Neil Postman, 1984) by allowing new media usages to eclipse literacy, print, and the sense of self they foster.

The above quotation applies to various uses of digital media in our daily lives, and when it comes to combine it with the core elements of teaching & ethics and teaching communication ethics, we are obviously looking at a complicated picture all together. The concerns related with ethics have always been an ongoing issue in communication and media studies. But as Couldry, Madianou and Pinchevski (2013) remind us by referring to the work of Garber, Hanssen and Walkowitz (2000) that ‘the turn to ethics’ has recently “achieved centrality in the humanities and social sciences” (p.3). Since the scope of this paper is insufficient to analyze the socio-historical, political, cultural and economic aspects of globally changing discourses on ethics at varying degrees, I will limit my discussion on certain outstanding issues that my colleagues and I have been witnessing over the years.

### **Teaching & Ethics**

I have been working in academia for eighteen years now, and I have witnessed my share of academic dishonesty of students ranging from cheating on exams to plagiarism in homework as many other colleagues might also have had, however particularly during the recent couple of years, I observe that there is –I would rather call- an indifferent attitude among students. Based on a couple of recent cases that I collected through personal communications with my colleagues, I would like to open up a discussion on teaching & ethics in the age of digital communication. Below

I will first give some examples of ethical misconducts based on teaching experiences of myself and my colleagues from several universities, and then I will try to discuss them by trying to understand the motives behind.

### **Analyzing What Does Not Exist**

The first case is quite unique, because of the way events unfolded in a couple of days; therefore I've provided more details than the others. In one of the fourth year courses, the term paper that was assigned to students was analysis of a popular cultural text. They were free to choose their subject; but they were expected to make their own analysis. One of the papers that were turned in was claiming to analyze a painting called "The Picture of Happiness" yet such painting did not exist at all. The real story behind "the picture of happiness" was a question posed to the painter Abidin Dino by the poet Nazım Hikmet. In 1961, Nazım Hikmet, his wife Vera and Abidin Dino were all in exile in Paris. The poet wrote a poem dedicated to Vera that was called "The Straw Yellow" in which he asks the painter "can you paint the picture of happiness Abidin?/ but without cutting the corners/ not the painting of an angel-faced mommy breastfeeding her rosy-cheeks baby/ neither the apples on a white spread/ nor the red fish wondering around the bubbles in an aquarium/ can you paint the picture of happiness Abidin?/ can you paint Cuba in the mid-summer of 1961/ can you paint the picture of thankfully, thankfully I've seen these days/ If I'd die now, I couldn't care less".<sup>1</sup>

And the painter responds with a poem instead of a painting. Hence there was no "the picture of happiness" in this context, at least not painted by Abidin Dino. The painting that was used in the term paper and claimed that it has been analyzed, belonged to an American painter, Dianne Dengel. The image of this painting was attached to the term paper of the student and Dengel's signature on the painting could be clearly seen. Apparently the student did not even pay attention to the painter's autograph. After a few hours of 'detective' work on the Internet, the instructor of the course found out that several web sites brought Dianne Dengel's painting, Nazım Hikmet's poem and together presented them as Abidin Dino's 'painting answer' to the poet, although in reality Dino wrote back a poem by referring to the dream of a just and equal world where he stated that "happiness cannot be framed in one canvas".

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

The same student had kept asking the instructor technical questions through social media channels about the assignment, starting from 10 p.m. until 1.30 a.m. the morning before turning in the paper. The instructor tried to answer all of the questions, sometimes more than once. Therefore, when the paper was submitted, the instructor was not only disappointed, but annoyed, -strangely enough the student passed the communication ethics course a few years ago according to the records. The student failed the present class and the instructor received a phone call from the mother, arguing that she witnessed how many hours her kid spent online to complete the homework, and accused the instructor of being unfair. The mother also called and visited the chair of the department, and went as far as asking to bring a scholar from a different university to check whether or not the grading was fair. The instructor strongly refused such action, insisted on the righteousness of the decision, and turned in the print outs of the online web pages to the department chair's office, proving that "the student's analysis" was taken word by word from the web page, which resulted in official procedures to be started for academic dishonesty.<sup>2</sup>

The story above made me think about several issues regarding the ethical discussions that we need to focus on, about academic honesty and/or dishonesty as much as the element of 'academic support' provided to students by us, especially as we try to teach ethics in the digital age. In the following pages, I will try to discuss the unethical issues related with the above-mentioned story -but not limited to that- and then expand the discussion to ethical misconduct as a result of recurring similar cases that me and my fellow colleagues have to deal with more often every single year.

Firstly, it seems that a large number of students tend to do their research on the Internet only. Although there are reliable sources that can be found online, they prefer the easy access popular pages with no intention of checking the accuracy of the information they reach. Secondly, they believe that they can demand almost anything from the lecturers anytime of the day or week. The same is valid about the office hours, which are announced by the instructors in advance. Instructors are expected to answer all the questions when asked, and if not, there is always a mechanism of complaining that the instructor does not spare time for the student. Thirdly, some parents are too much involved in the process, and oversee the fact that they are basically preventing their kids to become an adult and act as an individual.

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<sup>2</sup> There is more to that story, but I will discuss it in the following pages.

### **Replacing Author's Name**

The second case is a rather crude way of plagiarism; the instructor gives a book analysis assignment for which students are required to read a book that has been written by a local author in the twentieth century, and apply one of the analytical approaches that has been discussed in the class, i.e. structuralist, post-structuralist, post-colonialist, feminist, post-modernist and so on. Students ask for an extra week to turn the papers in, so that they can fulfill the expectations –which they claim that are quite high- and the instructor agrees. In a class of 28 students, 3 students' work stand out with the pristine use of terminology, analytical excellence and academic quality of conceptual framework. Starting from the very first sentences, the instructor becomes suspicious and runs random sentences from each paper in the search engines and gets hits for every single one of them as expected. It turns out that these 3 papers are works of scholars already published in national peer-reviewed journals. The students who submitted the articles just replaced their names with the names of the original authors. These three students were assigned an 'Incomplete' grade and were asked to redo the analysis. Two out of the three preferred following similar methods again, only this time through a collage of several published academic works, and they ended up failing the class.

There maybe several reasons for students' actions in the above case: First, they may believe that the instructors do not read their submitted works while grading. Second, they may take the risk of getting caught by taking their chance at deceiving the instructor and passing the class. Third, the only thing that matters, may be passing the class indeed, and therefore everything is fair to achieve this goal. Fourth, they might have done it before and accomplished to 'fool' an instructor before, therefore they may believe that they can do it again. And fifth, they may have a hard time understanding what plagiarism means.

### **Flattering Instructor's Ideological Tendencies**

The third case hints to one of the basic issues in academia in the digital age. The instructor of the course in which different ideological approaches towards media and culture are explained, reads the midterm exam papers, and notices that the answers given by the students -who made it clear that they have objections to certain arguments of those ideologies in the classroom- passionately defend the very same ideologies. Bringing the exam papers to the class, the instructor asks the very same students why they have argued so fiercely in favor of something they did not agree, instead they could just discuss it from their own perspective or just simply give theoretical

explanations. One of the students was brave enough to speak up: “we follow our professors’ social media accounts and see what they share, therefore we know their ideological tendencies. Hence during the exams we try to write everything down according to their beliefs and ideologies to get higher grades. For example, if the instructor is a lefty I would make flattering remarks about his/her ideology in class discussions and in exams, so that I can easily pass the class.”

The instructor smiles and makes it clear that there is no need to do this in that class, since such attempts only create problems in personal ethics on behalf of the students. This case points out several things: First, being exposed to different perspectives on political issues has little impact on already acquired knowledge, but more importantly preconceived values and beliefs of the students. Second, there is a lack of ability to merge theoretical explanations and real life conditions, briefly stated, lack of analytical skills. Third, there is a misconception about what higher education offers and what is expected from the students. And finally, related with the above deductions, there is no desire to internalize, think over or analyze the content; there is only one aim to be fulfilled, which is once again ‘to pass the course’.

#### **Slandering the Lecturer with False Accusations**

The fourth case is not directly related with the digital age, yet it is related with the ethical climate that has become widespread in the current communication environment. In one of the general communication theory courses, there are students from different majors as well as Erasmus students from different parts of Europe. The problem here is that the theory courses are already complicated on the subject, and when these courses are delivered in English, they become much more complicated for students to comprehend, however the courses are required to be taught in English for foreign students. So the lecturer prepares power point slides in English, and explains each slide first in English and then again in Turkish. One of the students, who takes the course, as an elective course is not happy with such treatment, goes to the Dean of the faculty and claims that the course is not taught in English. The Dean delivers this “news” to the head of department and s/he to the lecturer. In the next class, the lecturer quits explaining the slides in Turkish, which leads to a strong objection the class. Finally, the lecturer is put in a position to express the reason behind his/her action in the class. In the following hour, the student who tries to slander the lecturer with false accusations reveals himself/herself by making up an excuse to drop the class. Afterwards goes to the dean again and claims that the lecturer made his/her ‘comments’ about the language of the course public in the class, therefore the other students are giving him/her a hard time and cannot

stay in that class anymore. The Dean gets angry and instead of asking the lecturer what really happened or checking the student list of the class to see whether or not there are foreign students, talks to the head of department to give the lecturer a warning.

The student from the very first case was also involved in slandering the lecturer with false accusations. In later stages of the plagiarism attempts, no official action was taken since the lecturer withdrew his/her appeal in order to not to affect student's records provided that the student had to take the same course again. After the class starts, the same student speaks to another one who has failed the same semester and retakes the class in an attempt to build a case against the lecturer. The first student tries to convince the second student that since they are both from the same ethnic minority, the lecturer had failed them in the first place because of their ethnic backgrounds. However, the second student refuses it, and admits that his/her failure was his/her own fault since s/he did not study before the exams. Finally, the first student passes the course, and interestingly after a few months following the graduation, asks the same lecturer via social media account to write a recommendation letter for the job s/he is going to apply. The lecturer politely refuses, and suggests s/he should ask another professor whose opinions might be more valuable for the job s/he is applying for. The answer of the student is basically the summary of what I have been trying to discuss by now: "Since you have an administratively respectful duty, I believe your position would work in my benefit, that is why I wanted you to write me a recommendation letter".

Based on above cases once again we need to discuss erosion of personal ethical values and behaviors. It seems as if any deception method is justifiable as long as it works for the immediate interest. In the latter case the student's attitude of seeing no harm to ask for a recommendation letter from an academic who has witnessed several academic dishonesty attempts of him/her, -that clearly makes the student not recommendable for any job position- is just simply improper.

### **Asking for the Mission Impossible to be Accomplished**

The fifth case is about the unfeasible demands of the administration in the 'global world of digital age', which requires being at least bilingual. A part time lecturer is invited to teach a course on communication and ethics to the senior students in English. Since the total number of students is as high as 150, the lecturer divides the class into two sections. It turns out that the students lack the basic language skills to comprehend and write in English. The lecturer finds him/herself in a position to decide whether to go on speaking in English to meet the demands of the administration

or meet the needs of the students to understand ethics, one of the basic subjects in the field of communication and media studies. The lecturer decides to go with the latter option. After the final exam, the Dean of the faculty, - by the way whose academic background has nothing to do with communications whatsoever - calls in the instructor, and asks for a justification of his/her decision. The Dean goes further claiming that s/he is going to have to defend the lecturer against the Rector. The lecturer asks for permission to talk to the Rector him/herself to explain the situation, and the Dean steps back and argues that there is no need for his/her direct action. At the end, it becomes clear that neither the Rector nor the University Council had such demands, but it was the Dean himself/herself who insisted on this course to be taught in English to the senior level students, who never had any courses in English up until that time.

The link between this case and teaching & ethics in the digital age is indirect, yet it is important: The Dean tries to justify his/her action by claiming that communication students in the information age should be taught in English to be able to compete with their peers. This argument might be true, but as academics we do not have magic wands to teach students both English and a theoretical course at the same time at a senior level during only one semester.

### **Open-book Exams and Efficiency of the Method**

The sixth case is related with a very common habit of taking the class notes of a fellow student. There are always a few students who keep better notes in the class and whose notes are on high demand before the examinations. Even in some cases, those notes are used as cheating materials and put the owner of the original notes in unpleasant situations. When it comes to open-book exams, in which students are allowed to use their notes, course packs and text books, it should be clear that what they are asked to do is not copying the notes word by word, but discussing the issues based on the course material provided. In a course with a main objective of analyzing certain issues on communication and media, a student takes the pictures of the notes of an outstanding student with a smart phone. But s/he cannot frame the pages properly, so some words appear incomplete in the pictures. While answering a question about the objectivity and impartiality of mass media, s/he writes the words as they appear on the screen, which reads “nipulated” and fails to add the missing syllabi “ma” in the beginning. It indicates that the students have become skilled in adopting new technologies and benefiting from them in form, but the content becomes emptied in essence, since everything that is referred in the class notes have lost their meanings.

### **Preferring the Images over Words**

The final case is about the changed attitudes of new generations towards learning in the age of digitalized and visualized messages. In a course related with cultural representations of varied groups in societies, the lecturer supports the lectures by videos of media education series with popular examples from video games, music videos, movies and online resources. After each video, the floor is opened for in-class discussions. During these discussions, the lecturer realizes two interrelated things: First, students tend to understand what is explained through images better than what is verbally explained during the lectures, although basically both of them point out exactly the same issues. Second, students have a hard time discussing the subject at hand by using the proper terminology, and prefer to refer to the images they have seen in the videos. Hence as this case hints, the over-visualized world has also deeply affected the ways of learning, and solely lecturing will not be a sufficient method to teach in the new future.

### **Teaching Communication Ethics**

I have been teaching communication ethics courses for more than ten years now. I was able to observe the differences between students on ethical issues year by year during the transition from widespread use of traditional media to digital media as well as social media and alternative media. The following section consists of the cases mostly selected from my own experiences that I came across in communication ethics courses and again some from the experiences of fellow academics.

### **Caps, Video-footages & Discriminative Language in Social Media**

With the advance in editing technologies and the user-friendly recording and editing applications in smart phones, anyone can create their own content and disseminate via social media networks. The advantage of such technique is evident especially during the times of social and political turmoil to grasp the truth beyond corporate media broadcasts. But the downside of such applications is gradually decreasing awareness of making images public without the permission of the people involved in the event. There is a rather recent way of using images called ‘caps’<sup>3</sup> as the abbreviated version of captures. There are four major types of caps as I could observe: Caps used as a site of political mockery; caps that are humiliating others by using their images without permission; caps that are revealing personal details of people on personal friends list of social media accounts, again, without permission; and finally caps that are normalizing the cursewords, particularly sexist ones. The first case is the digital version of a long lasting tradition that can be traced back to satires from the oral communication period to the political pamphlets with cartoons

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Caps’ is an “invention” of the members of a social media platform (incisözlük) in Turkey.

once very popular in the UK in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and to the current comic books and comic strips online. The caps used as political mockery can be seen relatively ethical and can be taken as criticism up to the point the direct humiliation, discriminative remarks and invective expressions are not used. The second type of caps are unethical from the beginning due to the fact that the core aim is to humiliate people's appearances, dresses, class, color, ethnicity by stealing their online pictures from social media accounts without asking for their permission. The third type of caps can also be linked to the previous type, but differ in the way the personal details of the subjects are revealed and shared with the public, such as their full names, school/university they attend, family members, the place they live, age, etc. The last category became prevalent by using the first three categories in combination with sexist comments and highly sexist swearwords. These swearwords are used as an expression of defiance and challenge, and have been normalized by many people. Through what students share on their social media accounts, it is possible to pin down that these expressions emanate from internalized but never questioned sexist discourses. The students argue that they never mean to harm anyone and that they share such caps because they are funny. When they are confronted with the question what makes them think that they have the right to laugh at someone's humiliation, the answer is usually a big silence. Caps are not the only problem that can be linked to unethical behavior towards 'other' people; with the advent of mobile phone technologies, anyone with a smart phone can shoot anything and post it online immediately. Hence the students go on the streets and film people, events, fights, personal quarrels and since what they recorded happened out in the public places, they believe that they are not obliged to ask for permission to share it on social media.

### **Digitally Manipulated Content**

As Gordon et.al (2011) posit traditional media forms could "manipulate and change words, sounds and images". "Photographic experts" could change images "in darkrooms, artists could mimic or modify reality, printers could disseminate untruths as truths", once the recording and editing were available "anyone with the right tools could rearrange the contents in ways that were hard to detect (p. 237). But, the experts could detect these earlier forms of manipulative methods rather easier than contemporary examples.

When it comes to the digital media, it gets harder and harder to detect. It became so easy to cut and paste words and modify attributes of an image, sound or message. The source of information cannot be determined easily. And detection of a modified piece after the digital

revolution started to require more attention. Yet there is too many information to deal with, and it's impossible to spend time on every single bit of information to confirm its authenticity. The devices for alteration are cheap, and can be found almost everywhere. Therefore, digitally altered materials demand ethical caution from the 'audiences'. But also media professionals need to be alerted since "electronic content can be easily and quickly transmitted and thus readily available to news operations" (Gordon, et.al., p. 237). We know that there is always a time pressure on journalists that every minute is the 'deadline' for news. Especially during political campaigns and election periods, anonymously manipulated contents are circulated in media, particularly in social media. Students explain that they tend to rely on social media for news rather than the mainstream media, particularly after what they have experienced during social and political protests in 2013 in Turkey (Gezi Park Protests). This generation of youngsters is equipped with the necessary electronic skills to detect digitally manipulated content. They learn and use Photoshop applications, for example in 2014 local elections in Turkey, there were rallies and meetings where students immediately detected 'photoshopped' versions of the images of squares the politicians addressed their supposed supporters. The digital manipulators simply used Photoshop to copy and paste a group of people to make the place look packed. After the public release of the original and altered pictures of the meeting, it became apparent for everybody! Another example was an edited sound bite: The idea behind the edit was making the oppositional party's leader giving a speech in favor of his rival. Three days before the elections the video was released, they didn't go as far as lip-synching, but the sound-edit was quite successful: the result was a speech by the opposition complementing and praising the leader of the ruling party. Many people online via social media also shared that video. And, it was again my students who found out and shared on their social media accounts that the sound bite was altered.

The use of social media in times of crises, emergency situations, social and/or political unrest is another important issue. People share rumors via their social media accounts sometimes with good intentions, i.e. to help persons in need. However, there are also some social media users who intentionally spread rumors just to get more likes and/or followers or they simply digitally manipulate the content to discredit a political rival, panic people, promote an idea, or silence groups and/or individuals (a.k.a. "trolls"). In cases such as a natural disaster, an accident, a mass protest in which the information can be used to save people, a trustworthy source becomes a crucial asset. Recently the "Verification Handbook: A definitive guide to verifying digital content for

emergency coverage” (2014) was released by the European Journalism Centre so that media professionals in the field could also overcome the difficulty of separating the facts from the rumors. That is also a useful source for communication students who will soon become media professionals as well as for academics.<sup>4</sup>

### **Analyzing the News from Ideologically Distinct Media Organizations**

Each semester students from Communication Ethics course have a “media watch” assignment. For which they need to follow a certain medium -be it a newspaper, television channel or an online news platform- for the whole semester to point out the ethical misconduct in the news stories. The media are selected from a wide range of ideological affiliations including the far right and far left outlets. In the discussion hour of a three hours course, students share in the class the way the very same news stories are delivered in the medium they pick to follow. The analyses of students rely on both form and content, which are interrelated and presented as to deliver an ideological discourse. For the form, they need to note: how much space and/or time is allotted for the news piece; if there was any visual material used; where that news story was placed (first page, topic based classified pages, etc.). For the content, they need to note what kind of descriptions are used; whose words are quoted; how the subjects involved in events are presented; what kind of information is missing; what type of news are not delivered; what is the dominant ideological tone of the language in use (conservative, liberal, extremist, etc.); are there discriminative uses of language (including hate speech) against certain political, ethnic, religious groups, a gender or a nation; are there any expert views if so what is the gender, occupation, ideological view of the expert; and are there any connections between the news pieces and the media corporations’ other businesses. Based on these aspects, they need to point out the unethical delivery of the news and cross-read it with the ideological stand as well as policies of the media institution they have been following for the assignment.

It seems that the students are quicker to figure out the ethical misconduct in use of photographs, matters of private lives and news on children. But when it comes to “hard news” the ideological alignments become complex and taking the ‘unethical’ out of ideological tendencies of their own becomes rather difficult for the students.

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<sup>4</sup> Verification Handbook is also available in Turkish since August 2015.

### **Criticizing and Re-writing the News Stories**

For the second step of the above-mentioned media watch assignment, students are asked to re-write the news stories based on the ethical codes and principles they learn throughout the ethics courses. In one of my courses, I asked department of theatre students from my home university to perform a “shadow theatre” act during my class. We agreed on a scene that was going to be caused by a young woman entering the classroom and yelling at a young man and his response was going to be aggressive, then a friend of the young woman would come in and take her out, while the young man would still stay in the classroom. Based on our timing, I would enter the classroom. After the quarrel between the two, I walked in, and the students in the classroom were unfashionably silent, I looked surprised and then I asked what happened. They started to explain things with some hesitations since the young man was still in the classroom. They started to say bits and pieces of the discussion, which enabled me to ask them to turn what they just witnessed into a news story, but follow the ethical guidelines we covered so far. I told the young man if he needs to be cooled down, he could leave the room, and that he should see me after the class. (The students didn't know that it was an act until the end of the semester when the actors and the actress came into the class to give a bow in front of their ‘audience’). The results were as expected, 95% of the news stories were written with the mainstream media's clichés including the headlines. All reflected their own points of views, and none gave the specifics of what really happened accurately, instead they tried to make their story resemble the news they read, listen or watch on mass media outlets.

Apart from this rather experimental news-writing exercise, as I have mentioned before students are asked not only to criticize the news stories from an ethical perspective and define what is unethical in the media they have been examining, but also to re-write the very same stories following the ethical guidelines. That in turn, provided more insight on the application of basic codes of ethics as much as an understanding of how easy to fall in the line between the ethical and unethical delivery of the news.

### **Access to Media**

Access to media is another important issue in the digital age. When we rely more and more on technologically advanced devices and use traditional media less every single day measuring equity in receiving and disseminating information becomes a subject to be revisited. According to Gordon et.al. (2011), there are two basic kinds of access we can talk about: (1) Access of audiences

to the content disseminated by the media and (2) Access of groups to media in order to spread their messages (p. 306).

UNESCO's MacBride Commission report in 1980 states that "(...) communication is a basic individual right, as well as a collective one required by all communities and nations. Freedom of information –and more specifically the right to seek, receive and impart information- is a fundamental human right; indeed, a prerequisite for many others" (as quoted in Gordon et. al., p. 307).

But in terms of access both of the above mentioned kinds remain to be problematic. As "Everette Dennis pointed out succinctly when he noted 'reasons to be concerned about information-rich people versus information-poor people'. Information is power and some information will no doubt be priced so high that it will be out of reach of many people" (Gordon, et. al. 2011, p. 307-8). In the digital age, where some information can only be found online – especially the oppositional views, news delivered from the perspective of minority groups, etc.-, it is worth to take a look at the numbers to get a clearer picture on information-rich and information-poor people. According to a 2014 study about Turkey 45 % of population has access to the Internet; there are over 35 million Internet users and 36 million active Facebook accounts (fake accounts are included); almost 93 % of Internets users have Facebook accounts; 72 % of Internets users have Twitter accounts; 70 % of Internets users have Google + accounts; 33 % of Internets users have LinkedIn accounts (Digital Ajanslar, 2014). What do these numbers tell us? First of all, more than half of the population has no access to the Internet that is the proof that the digital divide is an ongoing issue in the context of Turkey. A great number of people among Internet users have social media accounts, but they use these accounts mostly for personal reasons (e.g. to share holiday pictures, talk about sports etc.)<sup>5</sup> What about public access to media? An indirect way to measure this kind of access would be revealing the access statistics of a 'popular' alternative medium, with the assumption that the alternative media allows open access of silenced groups and individuals. To show an example of how different groups access media, I used Alexa<sup>6</sup> to compare an alternative medium 'diken.com.tr' and the online version of the newspaper with the

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<sup>5</sup> For the statistical data on social media use in Turkey, please see <http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/uk/en/documents/Mobile-Consumer-Report-2013.pdf>  
<http://www.sosyoful.com/nielsen-ve-genart-medya-2014-turkiye-twitter-kullanici-istatistiklerini-acikladi/>  
<http://www.connectedvivaki.com/twitter-kullanici-istatistikleri-nielsen-2014/>  
<http://sosyalmedya.co/14-maddeyle-turkiyenin-dijital-dunyasi/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/diken.com.tr> and <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/posta.com.tr>

highest circulation rates in Turkey, 'posta.com.tr'. The results show that traffic of 'diken' ranks as the 273<sup>rd</sup> in Turkey, whereas 'posta' ranks as the 167<sup>th</sup>, -it is worth to mention that Posta also has a print copy on daily basis-. For 'diken' audience geography outside Turkey is scattered among the West; United States, Germany, Greece and United Kingdom. For 'posta' the same data are as follows: Azerbaijan, Germany, Switzerland and United States. When we take a look at the search keywords that send traffic to these news sites, the difference becomes clear: For 'diken' people, subject of the news or producer of the news articles are spotted as the search keywords while for 'posta' it is, in general, "news" or "posta news"<sup>7</sup>. And finally to see how visitors are engaged to these news sites, we can take a look at the bounce rate, which is 50% for 'diken' and 36.8% for 'posta'. These numbers do not directly point to the problem of access of groups to media in order to spread their messages, yet they hint that the visitors of alternative medium in this sample case are more consistent, more rigorous in their search for information, counter-hegemonic discourses that are generated and disseminated by alternative media address publics with relatively more educated backgrounds, also citizen journalism opportunities provided by alternative media allow political dissidents to have access to media to express their opinions, and producers increase the level of participation and access in general. Students from communication ethics courses come to an understanding that the news that are delivered by corporate media do have an agenda, definitions of dominant and oppositional media are bound to change due to temporal and spatial differences, and access to media is a problem on both senses of 'access'.

### **The Fine Line Between Private Lives and Public Interest in a Digital World**

There is an ongoing discussion about the people's right to know, hence media's role in serving as a mediator of this right. After certain crucial events –such as Lady Diana's death in 1999<sup>8</sup>- many people, including the media professionals started to question the line between private lives and public interest. What public is interested in and what public interest is are two distinct concepts after all.

According to Gordon et.al., privacy is divided into four parts in legal texts: "(1) Unreasonable intrusion (2) Appropriation of someone's name and likeness (usually for commercial purposes) (3) Being placed in a 'false light' (akin to defamation) (4) Public disclosure of facts that

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<sup>7</sup> It should also be noted that SEO (Search Engine Optimization) methods require a separate discussion for the solid analyses of such statistics provided for online sources.

<sup>8</sup> Paparazzi were seen as the cause of Lady Diana's car crash, killing two other along with her.

(even if true) offend the community's sense of what should remain private" (2011, p. 334). These four parts of privacy seem useful, but do not draw the line between private lives and public interest. There are questions that need to be taken into account while trying to depict the boundaries of that 'fine line': Who will decide where the privacy line between appropriate and excessive coverage, even for public figures, will be drawn? The public might be interested in the lives of political figures, celebrities, crime or accident victims or just any ordinary citizen walking down the streets. When is it acceptable to share the details of their lives? Is it acceptable to copy the profile pictures, personal data, shared memories, anecdotes taken from their social media accounts which are not shared with public and only open to friends and/or acquaintances?

In general privacy can be defined as an individual's right to be let alone (Gordon et. al., 2011, p.334), which is a very basic right especially in the digital age, where people are 'willingly' sharing private matters online. Especially visual materials often threaten to invade privacy. Images, videos, and 'caps' as a site of mockery are delivered and disseminated through digital tools and put on public display for 'audiences' to see and 'users' to share. Yet they still raise valid ethical concerns about the way they are obtained, the reasons they are put into circulation for, their potential as (cyber)bullying and hate speech, and their apposition with and individual's right to be let alone.

Students who believe that public figures cannot have a private life at the beginning of communication ethics courses come to an understanding that news related with public figures' wrong doing and acting against public interest are newsworthy, but the personal issues, which belong to private sphere of the individuals have no news value in essence in terms of journalistic practices. It is basically about teaching them to direct the right questions at the right time to the right people.

### **Some Concluding Remarks**

I am aware of the fact that the issues I discussed in the first part of this paper on teaching & ethics are not limited to the above listed examples and categories. These examples are just representative cases. It would be easy to put all the blame on the students, the education system, the political, cultural and social climate the world has been going through recently, demands of the job market in media business, erosion of values in general, and so on. And none of these would be wrong; they all have their specific impact in the outcome. I believe that we, as scholars, also need to consider our input in this outcome. It is true that we work under tremendous pressure in

varying degrees, which is the subject of a different discussion and require lengthy academic conversations elsewhere. The point that I am trying to make here is that we need to include students into the decision-making processes of production, accumulation, transfer and reproduction of knowledge. We might not be able to ‘teach’ being and behaving ethically as we would like to, but we can help students to raise more questions about their own behaviors by giving them more responsibilities in knowledge production instead of assigning them to predefined roles. We might start adapting to the digital age not only in form, but also in content as well and adjust the curricula according to the needs and changed perceptions of the younger generations while still being ethical and still guiding the ethical methods in learning. The above cases demonstrate that there is a need for a change in the matters of the teaching & ethics relationship.

In the second part of this paper, I did not include ethical problems of persuasive communication related with public relations and advertising in the digital age since these two fields are not part of my academic expertise. Instead, I tried to discuss the hardship of very basic ethical concerns in news making and media literacy and social media use when it comes to teaching communication ethics. What is out there and what we teach in the classrooms often collide, and students keep asking the same question “how will I be able to find a job if I choose to follow these ethical principles?”. I guess there is no easy way to answer that question, but I believe and often tell my students that “it’s not only about what we choose to do that define ethically right and justifiable behavior, most of the times it’s about what we choose *not* to do”.

In this paper I tried to sketch out two interrelated topics; teaching & ethics and teaching communication ethics in the digital age by giving examples based on direct observations. The current era is marked by the need to ‘turn to ethics’ for so many reasons among the ones that are touched upon all through this paper. Not only as communication scholars or students, but also as human beings, we feel the urge to redefine the ethically ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’, and ‘justifiable’ and ‘unjustifiable’. This paper aims to both make a sincere contribution to current debates on communication ethics in the digital age, and open up a discussion on ethics in general based on personal academic experiences, not on scholarly works solely.

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