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# Integrating Mindfulness into Ethics Teaching, Practice and Research

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Within the past few years, there seems to be a flourish of interest in mindfulness and its benefits to wellness, leadership, parenting ... you name it. Books, articles, and podcasts focusing on mindfulness are easily accessible and wildly popular. In fact, I subscribe to the Ten Percent Happier Podcast with Dan Harris and my Mother's Day gifts this year included two mindfulness books: *Seven Practices of a Mindful Leader* by Marc Lesser and *10-Minute Mindfulness* by S.J. Scott and Barrie Davenport. Admittedly, I read, listen and learn about mindfulness more than I actually practice it. Yet, it got me thinking about the connection between mindfulness and ethics, particularly since some of the philosophers I studied in my MA program at Saint Louis University and in my PhD program at the University of Oregon are often referenced in these discussions. The philosophy of communication class I took with Dr. Tom Bivins at Oregon keeps coming to mind as well when I think about the connection between mindfulness, communication and ethics. In this course, we used John Durham Peters book *Speaking into Thin Air*. I remember being particularly frustrated in this class because Peters challenged us to think about communication in a way that was so unlike the way my mind had been trained. He wanted us to

alter our perspective on communication to think more deeply about communication as “a rich tangle of intellectual and cultural strands that encodes our time’s confrontations with itself” (p. 2).

Others, too, have asked if mindfulness is ethical. In a post on *Psychology Today*, Dr. Tim Lomas concludes, “The answer, it seems to me, is *not necessarily*. At least not in the way that mindfulness is frequently taught and practiced in the West. Which is unfortunate ...” (para. 1). And Dr. Russell Fitzpatrick questions if mindfulness can enhance our ethical decision-making. He concludes: If mindfulness is an effective solution to problems such as stress, addiction, anxiety, depression, etc., can we also use mindfulness to enhance our cognitive moral development? The answer to the question may rest with “where” and “how” mindfulness works (para. 2).

The books highlighted in this trend report – *CONSCIOUS* by Annaka Harris; *10% Happier* by Dan Harris; and *Digital Minimalism* by Cal Newport – are not titles one might immediately think of when developing a graduate level philosophy of communication course or an undergraduate media ethics course, but I see value in thinking about how they could inform our ethical development, both personally and professionally. Hopefully, they challenge us to expand our thinking of communication and ethics, personally, professionally and digitally.

**Harris, A. (2019). *CONSCIOUS: A brief guide to the fundamental mystery of the mind*. New York: Harper.**

I was intrigued with Annaka Harris while listening to her on the Ten Percent Happier podcast earlier this year because she was honest, smart and engaging. She talked quite a bit about how her fascination with consciousness began as a child who suffered from migraines, and how it propelled her into a quest of understanding this complicated concept. Harris is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *CONSCIOUS: A Brief Guide to the Fundamental Mystery of the Mind*. She is also an editor and consultant for science writers, specializing in neuroscience and physics. In this book, she guides the reader through the evolving definitions, philosophies, and scientific findings that prove our limited understanding of consciousness. In the opening pages, Harris writes:

Our experience of consciousness is so intrinsic to who we are, we rarely notice that something mysterious is going on. Consciousness is *experience itself*, and it is therefore easy to miss the profound question staring us in the face in each moment: Why would any collection of matter in the universe be conscious? We look right past the mystery as if the existence of consciousness were obvious or an inevitable result of complex life, but when we look more closely, we find that it is one of the strangest aspects of reality.

In this relatively short book (less than 200 pages), Harris makes a complex topic approachable. Harris is not a scientist or philosopher, but her work is well-researched and referenced. Harris provides a brief overview of consciousness including problems, theories and a bit of history. It is not a complete scientific dissection of the topic, yet it provides insight into topics such as free will. Harris writes: “The concept of a conscious will that is free seems to be incoherent – it suggests that one’s will is separate and isolated from the rest of its environment, yet paradoxically able to influence its environment by making choices within it.” The second half of the book focuses on panpsychism, the doctrine or belief that everything material, however small, has an element of individual consciousness. She argues that panpsychism offers a coherent explanation for why some matter is able to be conscious – because all matter is in some sense conscious.

Overall, this book demonstrates the curiosity around a complex topic and provides an alternative way of thinking about it. I could see this book being used as supplemental reading in an upper division undergraduate seminar course or in a graduate course, particularly given its length.

**Harris, D. (2014). *10% Happier: How I tamed the voice in my head, reduced stress without losing my edge, and found self-help that actually works—a true story*. New York: Dey Street Books.**

In this book, Dan Harris, a broadcast journalist with ABC News from 2000 until 2019, recounts how he stepped onto the set of ABC's "Good Morning America" to do his anchor job and began suffering a panic attack while on camera in 2004. In the first chapter of the book titled *Air Hunger*, Harris recounts this painful experience during which "5.019 million people saw me lose my mind" (p. 1). Harris attributes his on-air meltdown to the "direct result of an extended run of mindlessness, a period of time during which I was focused on advancement and adventure, to the detriment of pretty much everything else in my life" (p. 2).

In *10% Happier*, Harris attempts to demystify meditation and show that if it can work for him, it can probably work for you too. He does this by giving the reader "exclusive access" to the voice in his head. With wit and humility, Harris shares his struggles with anxiety in his life and in his career. Furthermore, he is honest and upfront about the perception of mindfulness meditation writing:

Meditation suffers from a towering PR problem, largely because its most prominent proponents talk as if they have a perpetual pan flute accompaniment. If you can get past the cultural baggage, though, what you'll find is that meditation is simply exercise for your brain. It's a proven technique for preventing the voice in your head from leading you around by the nose. To be clear, it's not a miracle cure. It won't make you taller better-looking, nor will it magically solve all of your problems. You should disregard the fancy books and the famous gurus promising immediate enlightenment. In my experience, meditation makes you 10% happier. That's an absurdly unscientific estimate, of course. But still, not a bad return on investment.

This inspirational memoir of how Harris has tamed the voice inside his head while achieving professional success in a hypercompetitive business might be of particularly interest to media ethics students who could find themselves experiencing some of the same pressures Harris did early on in his career.

**Newport, C. (2019). *Digital minimalism: Choosing a focused life in a noisy world*. New York: Portfolio.**

Cal Newport is a computer science professor at Georgetown University who studies the theory of distributed systems. In addition to his academic work, he also writes about the intersection of technology and culture. In his most recent book, *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World*, Newport argues "the key to living well in a high-tech world is to spend much less time using technology."

Drawing on a vast array of real-life examples, Newport identifies common practices of digital minimalists and the ideas behind them. Newport's research suggests that the addictiveness of their design and the strength of the cultural pressures supporting digital technology as it invades our cognitive landscape ad hoc approaches to tame them are insufficient. Instead, he claims "I've become convinced that what you need instead is a full-fledged *philosophy of technology use*, rooted in your deep values, that provides clear answers to the questions of what tools you should use and how you should use them and, equally important, enables you to confidently ignore everything else" (p. XIV). The book includes seven chapters in two parts: foundations and practices.

Part 1 of the book concludes with a suggested method for adopting a digital minimalism philosophy that includes the *digital declutter*. Newport argues "aggressive action is needed to fundamentally transform your relationship with technology" and "the digital declutter provides this aggressive action" (pl. XVI). This process requires you to step away from optional online activities for 30 days and encourages you to take walks, talk to friend in person, engage your community, read books, and stare at the clouds. In chapter three, Newport recounts an experiment he did in December 2017 when he asked for volunteers who were willing to attempt a digital declutter during the month of January and provide him with updates along the way. To his surprise, he had more than 1,600 people sign up. When outlining the importance of the digital declutter, Newport explains:

Another reason it's important to spend the thirty days of the declutter rediscovering what you enjoy is that this information will guide you during the reintroduction of the technology at the end of the process. As stated, the

goal of the reintroduction is to put technology to work on behalf of specific things you value. This *means to an end* approach to technology requires clarity on what these ends actually are. (p. 71).

Thus, the second part of the book examines ideas to help readers cultivate a sustainable digital minimalism lifestyle. Each chapter in part 2 concludes with practices to help readers act on the big ideas of the chapter. For example, Newport explains, “I propose and defend the perhaps controversial claim that your relationships with *strengthen* if you stop clicking ‘Like’ or leaving comments on social media posts, and become harder to reach by text messages” (p. XVII). In conclusion, Newport writes, “We eagerly sign up for what Silicon Valley was selling, but soon realized that in doing so we were accidentally degrading our humanity” (p. 252).

The concept of digital minimalism would be a fascinating discussion with students in a media ethics course or a social media course at either the undergraduate or graduate level. This is an important read for all of us as we try to live a focused life in a noisy world with so many unnecessary distractions.

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## Ethics elsewhere

This feature offers briefs of ethics-related published scholarship in other fields, such as business ethics, environmental ethics, moral psychology, and neuroethics, to expand our understanding of how to think about ethical issues. The approach here is intentional to include scholarly research in cognate fields that complement media ethics research.

**Alzola, M., Chun, R., Argandoña, A., Choirat, C., & Siegel, D. S. (2019). Even when no one is watching: The moral psychology of corporate reputation. *Business & Society*, 58(6), 1267–1301. doi:10.1177/0007650319826189**

This article discusses the ethical dimension to corporate reputation by integrating the trait approach of personality psychology and philosophical ethics to the study of reputation and related concepts at the individual and corporate level. The authors discuss the concept of “character” and how it relates philosophically to reputation. Alzola, Chun, Choirat and Siegel summarize that “a firm’s reputation is based on internal and external perceptions of its past actions that ground expectations of its future actions. Stability, uniqueness, and comparativeness are the features that distinguish the notion of reputation from related notions” (p. 1274). Furthermore, the authors make an argument as to how identity is connected to personality which then impacts corporate reputation, the most valued organizational asset. The assessment definition of reputation, which highlights the moral dimension of corporate reputation, is linked to what ethicists define as character when they talk about individuals” (Alzola et al, 2019, p. 1274)

**Ballet, J., & Bazin, D. (2017). Hans Jonas: Bridging the gap between environmental justice and environmental ethics? *Environmental Ethics*, 39(2), 175–191.**

Environmental ethics and environmental justice have followed widely disparate paths, and this disassociation has resulted in an analytical schism. On the one side, environmental ethics embraces humankind’s relations with nature; on the opposite side, environmental justice embraces human-to-human relations via the medium of

nature. Hans Jonas' work is a bridge that crosses this conceptual divide: he spotlights the narrow correlation between human identity and responsibility, and insists on their inextricable bond with nature. However, this bond is a de facto bond that all human beings have with each other.

**Cui, J., Jo, H., & Velasquez, M. G. (2019). Christian religiosity and corporate community involvement. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 29(1), 85–125. doi:10.1017/beq.2018.13**

The authors examine whether religion influences company decisions related to corporate community involvement (CCI), which is usually considered part of the larger domain of corporate social responsibility. Cui, Jo and Velasquez suggest that “the characterization of CCI raises an important question: If a company’s investments in CCI are discretionary – i.e., not economically, legally, or ethically required – why do companies make such investments?” (p. 86). Using a large US sample, the authors found that the CCI initiatives of a company are positively associated with the level of Christian religiosity present in the region within which that company’s headquarters is located. This association persists even after the authors controlled for a wide range of firm characteristics and after the results were subjected to several econometric tests. Cui, Jo and Velasquez also found that while Catholic and mainline Protestant religiosity have a positive influence on firms’ CCI initiatives, evangelical Protestant religiosity does not. This supports their differentiated responses hypothesis which holds that institutional differences among religious groups will produce different effects on companies’ CCI. This hypothesis is based on institutional theory.

**Lindebuam, D., Al-Aoudi, I., & Brown, V. L. (2018). Does leadership development need to care about neuro-ethics? *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 17(1), 96–109. doi:10.5465/amle.2016.0220**

In this piece, the authors ask whether leadership development needs to care more about neuro-ethics in an era when neuroscientific interventions gain credence at work. Informed by emerging discussions among neuroscientists, they address two main issues. First, recent debates cast significant doubt on the validity of neurofeedback (especially neurofeedback using electroencephalography). These studies argue instead that it works through placebo rather than real effects. Second, further ethical concerns arise in response to (a) questionable commercial practice, (b) issues of organizational (in)justice, and (c) tendencies to ignore or downplay practical wisdom. After an engaging discussion set within a historical context of the field, the authors conclude that given the evidence presented here and elsewhere, they caution “there is no neuro-magic, and applying neuroscience to leader development is rife with conceptual and methodological pitfalls” (p. 106). Furthermore, they believe, “the leader development community should care about neuro-ethics if the aim to prevent bad management practices is not more than mere lip service” (p. 106). Thus, they conclude with a call to action for leader development researchers and practitioners.

**O’Toole, J. (2019). The prospects for enlightened corporate leadership. *California Management Review*, 61(3), 72–92. doi:10.1177/0008125619839677**

In his recent book, *The Enlightened Capitalists*, James O’Toole explores the challenges faced by two centuries of business pioneers who tried to do well by doing good. While many of their firms were financially successful, few of their progressive business practices turned out to be enduring. O’Toole writes, “The idealist in me wants to believe that ‘things are different now,’ but my realist side has difficulty believing that the expectations of investors have changed in the last 20 years, when they had not changed over two centuries” (p. 73). This piece critically evaluates six trends that will greatly determine the extent to which corporate executives will introduce virtuous practices in the coming decade: an emerging generation of enlightened and effective business leaders; the emergence of new forms of enlightened practices in the tech world; the advent of consortia of enlightened capitalists; social entrepreneurship and benefit corporations; a change in investor attitudes; and public

concerns. In conclusion, O'Toole believes "both the historical and contemporary evidence reveals that it is hard for businesspeople *to do good*" (p. 90).

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