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Considering the Ethics of Political Communication and Doing the Right Thing

Kati Tusinski Berg

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As I write this essay, more than 250,000 Americans have died from COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, in the last ten months. To put this quarter of a million deaths into perspective, it is equivalent to four Vietnam Wars, a war that took the lives of more than 58,000 Americans during a decade-plus of involvement (Brockell, 2020). On the deadliest day of the pandemic so far, September 18, 2020, the number of deaths surpassed the number of people killed in terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Yet, President Trump repeatedly downplayed the pandemic for months even as he sought reelection this year.

Exit polls from the 2020 election revealed that the global pandemic was the top issue of the election, which set a record for voter turnout with nearly 160 million people casting a ballot, up from around 138 million in the 2016 election (Medina & Russonello, 2020; Waxman, 2020). While coronavirus dominated voter thinking, it did so in very different ways. Voters concerned about rising infections sided with Joe Biden and those who wanted the economy open voted for President Trump. Weeks after the election, President Trump refuses to concede his lost despite President-Elect Joe Biden clearly winning the Electoral College with 306 to 232 votes. Trump continues to insist that, despite losing the

election by nearly 7 million votes, he won easily, and his legal team and the official arm of the Republican party claiming that he won by a landslide (Last, 2020).

As I reflected on everything we have experienced as citizens, parents, teachers, scholars and voters over the past nine months, my thoughts keep returning to political communication ethics, moral responsibility, and moral courage, particularly as it relates to leaders who must make tough ethical decisions. Thus, this trend piece features two timely books on these topics: Tom Cooper's new book titled, *Doing the Right Thing*, and an edited volume by Peter Loge titled, *Political Communication Ethics: Theory and Practice*. While very different in nature, both books highlight the ethical responsibilities leaders have in their communication and in their decision making. Cooper's book is part history, biography, inspiration, philosophy, and literature all in one that examines how famous leaders made the best ethical decisions they could even under difficult circumstances. Loge's edited volume promotes the study, teaching, and practice of ethics in political communication with contributions from top scholars and political communication practitioners. Interestingly, both authors are aware of and supportive of each other's work since Cooper is a Professor of Visual and Media Arts at Emerson College and Loge is a graduate of Emerson College. Both texts would be appropriate for upper division courses and graduate seminars in ethics and political communication.

Cooper, T. (2020). *Doing the right thing*. Abrams

In his latest book, ethics professor Dr. Tom Cooper, takes an interdisciplinary approach that combines the power of storytelling with analytical insight as he walks through the ethical challenges and dilemmas of a variety of historical figures. He asks, "When our choices are not between clear-cut good and evil but are instead between two goods, two evils, or two (or more) unknowns, what do we do?" (p. 1). Cooper's literary style draws the reader into a mystery of sorts that reveals how the ethical dilemma was solved and then deconstructs it using a philosophical approach. He believes, "It is important to identify and acknowledge people of character so that there are visible role models available not only to our youth, but for all of us who face moral pressure" (p. 7).

In *Doing the Right Thing*, Cooper shares the stories of a dozen "ethics heroes" – people who stood tall when faced with critical decisions, including Mandela, Malala, Gandhi, Queen Esther, Socrates, John Adams, William Wilberforce, Marie Curie, Harry Truman, Rachel Carson, Edward R. Murrow, and John F. Kennedy. The case studies cover eight national and ethnic groups; multiple political philosophical, scientific, and religious perspectives; all major classes, and more than a dozen professions since some had two or more careers. Additionally, through his examination of these "moral exemplars," Cooper identifies ten crucial factors in ethical decision-making, including notions of fairness and justice; impact or consequences; ends and means; tone and atmosphere; motivation and higher laws; allegiance and loyalty; values and principles, cultural context; implications; and proportion and balance. These ten factors are expanded on and applied to all of the cases to help the reader better understand the anatomy of decision-making, and ideally, become better decision-makers.

Cooper is intentional in his approach as he includes scholarly research in cognate fields that complement media ethics research. Richard Keeble, in the foreword, notes how Cooper "highlights the critical approach, the constant questioning and creative listening that lie at the heart of ethics" while inviting us to question whether these twelve are exemplars for us (p. v). In the preface, Cliff Christians

suggests “this profound book teaches moral philosophy with ingenuity” and notes that “its stunning transformation of moral philosophy into public discourse is historic” (p. v). Christians refers to Cooper’s moral philosophy as “distinctively at the leadership edge of the field, international in letter and spirit, with none of the besetting limitations and without patchwork on the incongruities” (p. viii).

Clearly, Cooper engaged in quite a bit of research when writing this book. He branches out far beyond media ethics into other fields although Edward R. Murrow is one of the central figures. *Doing the Right Thing* is a fascinating read for curious readers who yearn to think more clearly about what it takes to make the best ethical decisions, even under difficult circumstances. I envision engaging and intriguing discussions among both undergraduate and graduate students about how the decision making of these moral exemplars gives insight to help us all in our personal and professional lives. This book is for anyone interested in history, culture, philosophy and ethics, and encourages us to ask who would be on our list of moral heroes.

Loge, P. (Ed.). (2020). *Political communication ethics: Theory and practice*. Rowman & Littlefield

Earlier this year, Rowman and Littlefield published this edited volume by Peter Loge, an associate professor in the School of Media and Public Affairs at The George Washington University and the founding director of the Project on Ethics in Public Communication. The book is a mix of theory and practice with half of the book’s contributions from academics covering topics from Isocrates to digital media, and the other half from political practitioners who cover a range of topics from across the ideological spectrum. Loge, who regularly gives talks on college campuses, to political communications professionals, at consulting firms, and to groups of high school students and teachers on the topic of ethics in political communication, is well positioned to edit such a volume given his academic career and his 25 plus years in political communication. He has served in senior staff positions in the US Congress and Obama administration, worked as a lobbyist and strategic communications consultant, and led and advised a range of advocacy organizations.

In the introduction, Loge immediately sets the context and tone for the book writing:

Democracy is a political process that produces policy outcomes. It is also an outcome in itself; it is also both a means and an end. Democracy is premised on communication; we talk through problems rather than beat each other up (at least that is the idea). If democracy is a way to choose policies, and policy choice happens through communication, we ought to take that communication seriously (p. 1).

The authors in this book do just that as they approach the topic of political communication ethics from different angles from within academia, from different types of political communication and from a range of political perspectives. Loge challenges readers to think about two things as they read and evaluate the authors’ arguments: (1) what counts as a political communication? and (2) what counts as ethically important or presents an ethical challenge?

I was particularly intrigued by Mark McPhail’s chapter, “The Rhetoric and Ethics of Political Communication: Freedom Summer as a Case Study in Moral Leadership.” McPhail explains, “The study of ethical leadership offers important insights into the relationship between theory and practice and the extent to which philosophical knowledge can be translated into social and political action” (p. 81).

In this chapter he offers a complete description of political ethical leadership by focusing on its role in race relations, specifically the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project and the leadership of Mississippi politician and activist Dick Molpus. McPhail concludes that these examples “offer practical illustrations of adaptive work, servant-leadership, and a higher standard of leadership, as well as opportunities to expand our definitions of ethical political leadership by illustrating the challenging established social norms, the value of self-sacrifice, and the limitations of political structures and institutions” (p. 95).

A chapter from the second half of the book that caught my eye was Edward Brookover’s “Yes, We Must Do Better (But It’s Not as Bad as You Think)” because he addresses what many of us, I suspect, have thought recently. He suggests, “Let me repeat myself so there is no confusion as we discuss ethics and political communications: yes, we must do better. We must do better because the times in which we live are as bad as they have ever been in American politics, right? (p. 157). Brookover is a Republican campaign consultant with more than 30 years of experience in campaign politics. He served as a senior adviser to Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, specializing in delegate selection, before he was fired from the campaign in August 2016. Currently, Brookover is Chairman of Greener and Hook’s Political Practice.

He acknowledges a media landscape where audiences for television news are dwindling and news sources are becoming tailored to fit personal, political and moral views. Brookover writes:

Anonymous postings on social media sites attack our views, our values, our families, and ourselves. Friendships can be lost and relationships strained on these venues. It seems we are constantly bombarded with unwanted opinions and statements. Even talk show host Ellen DeGeneres was vilified on Twitter after sitting with former president George Bush as a football game. Vitriol replaces courtesy and fanaticism replaces logic, leading us to seek shelter by only communicating with those who agree with us (p. 157).

While Brookover admits that while we must do better it’s not as bad as we think. He explains, “Our history is filled with political venom, horrific ad hominem attacks on candidates, and dirty tricks. Our political past does not make any of today’s behavior right, but today’s environment is not new” (p. 158). He then reflects various historical examples before challenging major players in the political discussions – politicians, political consultants, the press, and the public – to commit to do one simple thing better.

Overall, this book is an much-needed resource for students and scholars across many disciplines who want to better understand the role of ethics as it relates to both the theory and practice of politics in a democracy.

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Medina, J., & Russonello, G. (2020, November 3). Exit polls showed the vote came down to the pandemic versus the economy. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/03/us/politics/exit-polls.html>

Waxman, O. (2020, November 5). The 2020 Election set a record for voter turnout. But why is it normal for so many Americans to sit out elections? <https://time.com/5907062/record-turnout-history/>

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.

Birte, F., Lüdeke-Freund Florian, & Stefan, S. (2020). A stakeholder theory perspective on business models: Value creation for sustainability: JBE. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 166(1), 3-18.:<http://0-dx.doi.org.libus.csd.mu.edu/10.1007/s10551-019-04112-z>

This article presents a broader view of how business models are developed and managed to create value based on a stringent application of stakeholder theory that highlights mutual stakeholder relationships in which stakeholders are both recipients and (co-) creators of value in joint value creation processes. The authors found that the concept and analysis of value creation through business models needs to be expanded with regard to (i) different types of value created with and for different stakeholders and (ii) the resulting value portfolio, i.e., the different kinds of value exchanged between the company and its stakeholders. They note, “With the explicit consideration of value flows in both directions from the company to a stakeholder and from a stakeholder to the company, the framework accounts for interdependencies in stakeholder relationships and value created through a business model as a portfolio rather than a single outcome” (p. 8). This research proposes a shift in perspective from business models as devices of sheer value creation to business models as devices that organize and facilitate stakeholder relationships and corresponding value exchanges.

Díaz-Domínguez, A. (2020). How Futures Studies and Foresight Could Address Ethical Dilemmas of Machine Learning and Artificial Intelligence. *World Future Review (Sage Publications Inc.)*, 12(2), 169–180. <https://0-doi-org.libus.csd.mu.edu/10.1177/1946756719894602>

This review, which draws from ethical concerns of communities of machine learning developers, includes three main sections: (1) a brief explanation of central concepts, such as big data, machine learning, and artificial intelligence; (2) a discussion about ethical issues, such as bias, discrimination, and dilemmas in research; and (3) a brief description of how future studies could address ethical dilemmas derived from different time horizons among machine learning immediate results, predicting short-time predictions, and foresight long-term scenarios. The author concludes, “concerns on the ethics of the whole data science process should be connected to future methodologies, to offer creative solutions that address dilemmas derived from the combination among ethics, ML and AI, and futures studies” (p. 178).

El Zoghbi, M. B., & El Ansari, W. (2014). Ethical Concerns and Contributions in Response to Climate Change and the Links to Well-Being: A Study of University Students in the Netherlands. *Central European Journal of Public Health*, 22(2), 118–124. <https://0-doi-org.libus.csd.mu.edu/10.21101/cejph.a3998>

This study explored the concerns and contributions of university students in response to the ethical dimensions of climate change, and the implications for their well-being. A triangulation of methods including focus groups, in-depth interviews and participant observation was employed in this research. The findings suggest that “university students’ moral concerns and contribution with regards to climate change can have various implications for their short and long-term well-being” (p. 124). The authors recommend that public institutions establish formal platforms for university students to participate in order to help them feel empowered and in control of their future.

Panizza, S. (2020). If Veganism Is Not a Choice: The Moral Psychology of Possibilities in Animal Ethics. *Animals* (2076-2615), 10(1), 145. <https://0-doi-org.libus.csd.mu.edu/10.3390/ani10010145>

Typically, discussions about the ethics of buying and consuming animal products assumes that the moral agent has two choices equally available, to engage or not to engage in such behavior. This paper argues that, in some cases, the experience of those who refuse to participate in animal exploitation is not a choice, but a reconfiguration of their understanding of what animals, and the products made out of them, are. Panizza explains, “Taking moral impossibility seriously, I will argue, it suggests a radically different way of thinking about a specific and increasingly adopted position in animal ethics—not contributing to animal exploitation by buying or consuming animal products, which I shall call veganism for short—which entirely subverts the view just summarized” (p. 146). The author advocates for a reframing of the debates in animal ethics concluding that it is not always correct to speak of veganism as a choice: the reason being that, sometimes, the opposite does not present itself as a possibility.

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